

Universal Audio LA-3A

Is nothing sacred? Thankfully not, as UA continues to plunder its historical back catalogue of desirable and elusive outboard. Throw **GEORGE SHILLING** into a room with a classic audio leveler and we have the recipe for a little light entertainment. (I think I'm going to enjoy this. Ed)



SINCE THE RATHER SPLENDID 1176 and LA-2A reissues, UA received increasing requests for an LA-3A. This model is perhaps less celebrated than the former two, but mostly because of its diminutive half-rack 2U size, its unassuming appearance and its lack of glamorous valves. Designed in the late 1960s this was sold as a cheaper solid-state equivalent of the LA-2A but used the same T4 optical cell for its gain reduction circuitry. In the LA-3A, the T4 sits inside a smaller casing and the LA-3A uses different input and output transformers. It also borrows some components from Putnam's 1176. Although there was a Teletronix-branded original, it is the more commonly found Urei version that this reissue is based upon.

The LA-3A was designed by Brad Plunkett, who employed reissue designer Dennis Fink as a design engineer in the 1970s. As we have come to expect, UA's efforts to recreate the original were incredibly painstaking. The tracks on the bottom of the circuit board look like a surrealist join-the-dots line drawing, rather than the straight lines and angles that derive from modern CAD programs. But rather than tidying this up, the UA team, led by Dennis Fink, effectively traced the original pattern. Some parts were successfully sourced, others like the transformers were commissioned using examples from original units as a guide. They even used the same internal cable and wire colours.

The LA-3A (UK£1049 + VAT) is shipped with a pair of rack ears included, one of which is effectively a half-U width blanking plate that can be mounted either side. For side-by-side mounting of a pair of units, you need to purchase a separately available dual mounting kit.

Build quality is the usual exemplary UA standard, with solid construction that looks as well assembled as a Victorian steam locomotive.

The front panel really could not be simpler. It has a Power toggle, a meter Gain Reduction/Output Level toggle, an excellent central meter that illuminates when power is on, and knobs for Peak Reduction and Gain. The rear panel is a little more involved. All the original features are present, but this is where three important modern additions are implemented. Like the original, there is a power transformer mounted outside the back of the box — modern units tend to put these inside, along an external cable, or in a wall-wart. But apart from looking a bit odd, I can't see a problem with this. Next to this is a 115/230V switch, a fuseholder, and the first bow to modernity in the shape of an IEC mains socket — pretty much a legal requirement. At the other end is the old-fashioned tag strip connector, where bare wires can be attached for signal. This is accompanied by another upgrade — modern XLR input and output connectors. However, the terminal strip is still needed for stereo linking, and provides a means for attaching a second output in addition to the XLR. To this end, a 600ohm resistor is attached across the output terminals.

Also on the rear are a selection of adjustments. Most important is the Limit/Compress toggle, and although most will leave this in Compress mode, I disapprove of useful controls being hidden on the rear of rackmounting units. Limit mode increases the compression ratio when pushed hard, which is sometimes better when taming wayward bass players, but the essential character of the LA-3A remains the same. However, I have to admit the other two toggles are definitely better here on the rear. That is because they have the potential to throw the output gain up by 20dB which is not something you want to inadvertently flip when the singer is wearing cans (...well... I suppose not. Ed). The Mod/Normal toggle controls a circuit that was not

part of the original LA-3A spec, but which was a very commonly applied tweak. This sets the gain structure differently to achieve a significantly better signal to noise ratio, while still providing plenty of output gain, as the LA-3A has about 50dB gain to start with. The accompanying gain toggle is a 20dB input level pad, handy when not using the Mod. But the only situation I can imagine switching the Mod off in is when pairing with an original un-Modded unit. A screw-pot balances the gain reduction when pairing units and another screw-pot sets high frequency sensitivity. This makes the compressor more sensitive to high and high-mid frequencies, a feature originally designed to prevent over-modulation when broadcasting. Both of these screw-pot adjusters are described in the manual as operating in the opposite direction to the panel legending, which appears to be correct.

In use, the sound is big and warm, without the valve richness that you benefit from with an LA-2A. Slightly cleaner and more natural than its sometimes larger-than-life big brother, there is nevertheless a subtle glow that helps most signals, and the two-stage release works smoothly and invisibly. It is beautifully unobtrusive when taming vocals and controls bass guitar naturally. I used it for gently levelling female operatic vocals, where it was ideal as the artist and producer professed a dislike of 'compressed' sound.

I was intrigued to see if the HF Contour could be set to effect de-essing. With my opera singers, there was a little sibilance reduction, but more usefully, setting the pot fully counter-clockwise turned out to be an effective way of reducing inhaling breath noise and gasps between phrases.

No matter how hard you push it, the sound remains remarkably clean, and you feel the LA-3A is reassuringly in control of the situation at all times. I was lucky enough to be able to compare the unit to Livingston Studios' (London) original Urei model. After I'd tweaked the old one's HF Contour pot to flat they were virtually indistinguishable, although, when pushed hard, the new one retained slightly more transient clarity — probably more down to the age of the components than anything else. ■

PROS A lovingly re-created classic; simple operation; high quality 'invisible' compression; excellent build.

CONS Incorrect manual description of screw-pot direction; hard to access Limit/Compress toggle when rackmounted.

Contact

UNIVERSAL AUDIO, US:
 Website: www.uaudio.com
UK, SCV London: +44 208 418 1470