

Blue Coconut Unity Echo Verb

Well, we haven't seen a new one of these for quite some time — long enough, in fact, for a new generation to come through and even wonder what it does. **GEORGE SHILLING** laces up a loop and selects some heads.

Brand new tape echo units are now rare and for good reason with the original devices being squeezed out of the market by transistor and digital processors and then plug-ins. And then there's the price. For a fraction of the cost of this new device you could pick up a mint condition vintage model or a hardware or plug-in emulation that comes pretty close to the real thing. So why might you spend so much on a new one?

UK pro-audio distributor Unity Audio has taken the business of creating the Echo Verb extremely seriously (UK£1595 inc. VAT). The designer Terry Macdonald includes Watkins/WEM on his CV, known for its popular Copicat devices that bear a passing resemblance to the new model. However, this British-built newcomer includes six heads and a 'reverb' mode, with switching and mode selection controlled by microprocessor.

The front panel includes a sexy blue-lit VU with chrome surround that also hides a red light behind it to indicate clipping. There are individual on/off buttons for each head with dual colour LEDs and nicely detented knobs. The deck plate looks industrial but the unit is surprisingly light. The Echo Verb seems extremely well built and a five-year guarantee on the electronics is reassuring. The look is marred only by the rather unnecessary printing of a wordy and slightly inaccurate explanation of mode function on the top plate — intelligent button legending could perhaps have averted this. The printed instructions are also lacking clarity. For the price of the unit, a professionally written manual should have been included; instead, the explanations include grammatical and typographical errors and just plain bad English: "The echo & direct switch between the echo playback off tape On or direct signal & echo. Best used with the send & return inputs." Thankfully, operation is fairly straightforward and most studio boffins will soon work out the unit's functions and foibles.

The path of the quarter inch tape includes a capstan and a couple of flywheels, one holding the tape with some spring tension. The head assembly includes, from the left, an erase head, a record head, then six playback heads and a final cleaning pad. The heads are not spaced evenly, with a gradual slight bunching up from left to right, making for some

interesting multitaps and some not-quite-in-time rhythmic delays. Unlike the Copicat, which included a useful folding lid, the Echo Verb leaves the deck plate exposed when not in use and an optional dust cover is available but costs extra.

For studio users there are transformer balanced XLR connections on the rear but for musicians a front panel jack socket is provided with two different level settings — the higher gain setting has enough grunt to accommodate single coil pickups. An output jack is also provided. Additionally, the aforementioned Send and Return jacks provide a third set of connections — I had hoped these might provide an insert point but this is not the case. The input knob goes from 0 to 13 with three detente notches per unit. Dedicated buttons enable easy switching On or Off of the playback heads, while a Tone button provides two settings applied to the echo. One setting is effectively 'flat', with a bright, clear sound while the other takes some of the edge off. And, as you may have surmised from the manual extract above, there is means to enable or disable dry signal from the output. When mixing signals these can be balanced using the Echo Level and Output (overall) Level knobs. The Echo signal can also be muted using the front panel button or a footswitch. Choosing an appropriate setting is a mixture of choosing heads and also adjusting the motor speed knob, which has an unexplained centre detente and a reasonably wide (but not huge) range.

Sonically the Echo Verb is remarkably clean. There is no trace of wow and flutter, little hiss or noise. In fact, unless it's driven hard there are very

few artefacts that might suggest you are hearing a tape echo, especially in most contexts where the direct signal and other mix elements partly mask the sound. Although real knob twiddling is hard to beat, I had almost as much fun abusing the crunchier UAD Space Echo plug-in. If the input level is pushed on the Echo Verb there is some tape compression and distortion to be had and the Sustain knob has plenty of range for inducing feedback to destruction. However, because of the clarity of the unit this can be rather shrill. The overall tone coming off tape slightly lacks bass warmth and pressing the

Tone button only helps reduce the brightness a little.

For a more washy sound there is a 'hidden' Reverb mode, whereby pressing the Head 1 button for two seconds sets it flashing. This creates a softer tone with an apparently more complex feedback path linking the first two heads. But when multiple further heads are selected and sustain is increased, a pseudo-reverb effect can produce interesting results, although this is an effect rather than

a reverb. Playing a Telecaster through the Echo Verb took me straight into Joe Meek territory, with over-the-top echoes being the order of the day. As a mixing delay, I felt the Echo Verb lacked a juicy enough character to warrant having it sitting there rotating beside the mixing desk all day — I'd worry about tape wear and probably

swap it for something without moving parts! It did initially suffer from some disturbing mechanical squeaking when the motor was left running for a short while. But I'm told this is because it was new and the bearings soon bed down.

The Echo Verb performs admirably and, if anything, it has been made almost too well. As a creative tool it encourages experimentation and performance, and switching heads on and off, and varying speed and sustain on the fly is great fun during tracking or bouncing. I'd have liked an even greater range of motor speed and stereo outputs with head panning would undoubtedly have made far better use of the six discrete delay taps, but this would have made things even more pricey. Even so, there is a great variety of effect achievable with the Echo Verb. So, if you want a reliable, capable tape delay that should give years of reliable service then the Echo Verb is the one. ■



PROS Thoroughly designed and engineered; well built; six heads; low noise; pseudo-reverb mode; long warranty.

CONS Overly clean, bright, sometimes harsh sound; mono only; expensive; dust cover costs extra.

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