



Daking Pre One

Targeted at portable applications for those who like their quality in a luggable format, **JON THORNTON** handles a brick-like preamp.

Former Blues Magoos drummer, recording engineer and studio owner Geoff Daking has been involved in the manufacture of audio equipment since 1994. It's a fairly diverse career history, and it's had a significant effect on the approach that Daking Audio takes to equipment design and manufacture. While a studio owner, Daking was lucky enough to have, in the same facility, consoles by Trident, API and Neve and as a result has what is probably one of the most considered understandings of the relative merits of the preamplifier designs employed in each. Added to that was a body of knowledge about what specific items of equipment a whole array of engineers and producers chose to use, and equally what they didn't.

When the move from studio owner to manufacturer came, this led to an examination of what aspects (in terms of design and construction) were common to the most preferred equipment choices, and which aspects were common to equipment that was less preferred. The results won't be a shock to most people — the list includes the use of discrete components, Class A circuit design and transformers in the audio path — but they are all aspects that have an inherent cost associated with them, and suffer when the bottom line and margins are driving product design. The result of all this was the development of a range of outboard (and even at one point mixing desks), that embraced the philosophy of higher cost approaches equating to good sound.

The range currently includes a four-channel mic preamp, a single-channel mic preamp with EQ, mono and stereo FET-based compressors, and the latest addition — a single-channel mic preamp in a portable, brick-shaped housing dubbed the Daking Pre One (UK£495 + VAT).

The Pre One is brick-like in looks and construction, with a one-piece solid steel shell into which slides

an assembly containing the circuit board and front and rear panels. Not only does this result in a very rugged structure, but it also helps out in terms of rejection of RF interference. The aesthetic here is really from the no-nonsense, content over form school — something that runs throughout the product line. That's reinforced by the colour scheme, which is a drab green finish reminiscent of military gear. It might not be to everyone's taste, but you do get the feeling that money has been spent on what's inside rather than fancy visual design.

The rear panel gives you mic level input on XLR, which feeds into a Jensen transformer as the first part of the input stage. Balanced outputs (differential) are available on XLR and TRS jack. A 6-pin DIN socket accepts power from an external OEM DC power supply, which looks like a standard laptop supply to me.

An additional unbalanced, high impedance input (TRS jack) is located on the front panel with an associated selection switch for DI purposes. You

also get a continuously variable high pass filter, which can be set anywhere up to 200Hz, a continuously variable gain control ranging from +25dB to +70dB, and the usual polarity reverse, phantom power and pad (-20dB) switches. And then there's the meter. Somewhat refreshingly, there's an LED output

meter that has a full 20 segments, showing output level from -17dBu to +22dBu plus a clip indicator that illuminates at 26dBu. It certainly makes a change from other some other preamplifiers I could mention that make do with only three LEDs, and it puts on a nice light show when you first power the unit up. It also holds peaks for about a second, although there's no way to turn this feature off if you don't like it.



Ballistics of the meter are true VU style and all in all it's very comprehensive and easy to use — even at some distance from the unit.

Plumbed in and powered up, and mated with a C414 for initial test purposes, the first thing that strikes you is just how unfussy the sound is. There's exceptional clarity in the high end, but nothing that sounds overblown or brittle, a solidity to the low end but again with no hint of low-frequency harmonic distortion or 'warmth' that you might expect from a classic design. It's just clean, full and solid. Back to back comparisons with a Millennia HV3C and an API 3124 with an acoustic guitar and vocals as sources revealed that it seems equally as 'quick' as either of these designs in terms of transient resolution. Overall tonality seems a little softer than the Millennia, particularly on sibilance, and ever so slightly weightier than the API in the bottom octaves. That's not to say that the sound is undistinguished — quite the reverse — it's just that the preamp just gets on with the job, without ever getting in the way of the sound.

There's plenty of gain on offer here and even with the full 70dB applied the Pre One keeps things quiet with ribbon microphones and other low output designs; microphone self noise is going to be an issue long before the Pre One starts bringing things to the party. The variable high-pass proves extremely useful too and filtering out extreme LF noise, such as air conditioning, is easily achieved without sacrificing much in the way of weight to the sound.

Reading all that back, it might seem that I'm damning the Pre One with faint praise but that couldn't be further from the truth. What you get here is a unit that behaves just like it looks — no-nonsense, solid and truthful. And while it may not have the degree of colouration that some users might associate with 'classic' outboard, it does sound a lot more forgiving and less brittle than other units that are designed to be as 'straight' as possible in terms of signal path. ■

PROS

Solid, detailed, truthful sound; built to last; portable; great metering; not as coloured as some vintage designs.

CONS

Not as coloured as some vintage designs; looks might be too utilitarian for some.

EXTRAS

The Daking FET3 is a dual-channel limiter with Class A discrete compressor circuitry and gain stages that build on the quality and performance of the Daking FET II single-channel limiter while adding several front panel features.



It gains variable high-pass filters — from 0 to 200Hz — at the detector stage to improve the behaviour of each limiter channel. It uses audio summing for stereo linking and the stereo link is continuously variable from 0 to 100%, allowing the limiter channels to be tied together to a greater or lesser extent.

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