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Lisson Grove R-124 Compressor Review

Mar 1, 2012 9:00 AM, By Barry Rudolph

UNIQUE-SOUNDING GAIN CONTROLLER WITH EMI, ALTEC LINEAGE



The **Lisson Grove R-124** single-channel, variable- μ compressor is an homage to the EMI/Abbey Road RS124, which itself started out life as the U.S.-made Altec 436B compressor originally released in 1958 for telephone and broadcast use. American recording engineers found them unreliable, lacking good bass response, and mostly ignored them. EMI's engineers recognized the Altec's potential and made extensive circuitry changes, tube substitutions and operational modifications, transforming the unit into the superior-sounding RS124. The RS124 was used exclusively at Abbey Road and other EMI studios throughout the world. It became a big part of the "British Sound," appearing on countless records in the '60s and '70s.

The Lisson Grove R-124 builds on the RS124's legacy with further refinements, enhanced reliability and some modern touches—all without deviating far from the original's core sonics.

BUILT LIKE A BRITISH CHALLENGER II TANK

The U.S.-made, two-rackspace R-124 comes in an all-steel cabinet painted with a super-thick and scratch-resistant industrial coating. The "chicken-head" knobs, institutional-green front panel, vintage jewel pilot light and antique-looking Hoyt Electric gain reduction VU meter all combine to give it a militaristic retro look.

Inside, a steel truss panel running the width of the unit supports the main circuit board on one side, and three horizontally mounted tubes on the other. The power supply board is mounted on the inside of the unit's back panel and has a switchable 110/220 VAC mains IEC socket.

Point-to-point hand-wiring is used throughout, with pots made by Pec or Alpha, switches by Carling, and critical audio capacitors from Auricaps and Solen. The three tubes (6ES8, 6CG7 and 6AL5) are in ceramic sockets but without hold-down brackets. Sowter makes the input transformer; the output transformer is a custom-made CineMag.

To counteract changes in sound and operation over time caused by tube aging, component drift and the quirky 1950 circuit design, the R-124 (like the EMI RS124) uses a clever tube-balancing method. With the unit connected and patched, pushing a front panel button activates a NE-2 neon bulb relaxation oscillator circuit that sends a 3Hz pulse to both cathodes of the triode halves of the 6ES8 push-pull input stage, causing a low-level "ticking" sound in the unit's output.

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