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## Black Lion Audio B173

Microphone Preamplifier

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By Bob Thomas

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**If you want the vintage Neve 1073 sound but the bank balance doesn't allow it, this might be worth checking out...**

The Black Lion Audio (BLA) B173 is the company's take on the preamp section of the Neve 1073, and comes in a 1U half-rack form. Its brushed-metal front panel is finished in a fetching shade of blue and carries the control complement common to many modern mic preamps: power, gain, phantom power and polarity-invert buttons, an output-level attenuator and the button that activates the front-panel quarter-inch TS-jack DI socket. At the rear sits the balanced XLR microphone input, the quarter-inch TRS jack socket that carries the B173's line-level output and the socket for the supplied 24V AC wall-wart power supply.

The stepped gain control, Cinemag input transformer and Edcor output transformer are the largest features of a clean internal layout that's primarily made up of surface-mount capacitors and thick film resistors. However, full-size capacitors, selected for their sonic capabilities, are used in the audio path.

Fire up the B173's Class-A electronics and you're immediately into the deep, warm low end, smooth mid-range and detailed high end that made the Neve 1073's reputation. Any 1073-inspired mic preamp lives or dies by the quality of its transformers — and the B173 most definitely lives! The noise floor is very low, even when you're cranking the gain up towards its 80dB maximum in order to drive the output transformer hard. However, since there's no metering, you'll have to use your ears and the output level control to keep unwanted distortion at bay.

I'm not totally convinced by BLA's implementation of the stepped gain control on the B173. On a 1073, the gain range runs from +20 to +80 dB in 5dB steps, but the B173's increments are, somewhat strangely, less regular in size. However, these gain inconsistencies can easily be compensated for by attenuating the output level, so it's not a major gripe.

As with an original 1073, there's little you can do with or to the B173 to make it sound bad. Vocals, acoustic instruments and percussion all benefit from the sense of increased bottom-end weight that you'd expect from the low-order harmonic distortion that its transformers deliver. The DI input lends richness to both guitar and bass, especially if you push the output

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transformer. However, since the DI input bypasses the input transformer, you'll need to use the mic input if you want that bit of extra warmth.

According to their web site, Black Lion Audio set out to "capture the essence of the original Neve 1073" in the B173 and, by and large, I think that they've succeeded admirably in achieving that goal. If you're looking for a quality mic preamp to give your tracks the overall flavour of a 1073 without causing your bank balance too much pain, then the Black Lion Audio B173 certainly deserves to be high up on your audition list and is well worth hunting down. Bob Thomas

£372 including VAT.

[www.scvdistribution.co.uk](http://www.scvdistribution.co.uk)

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