



Tape Op

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# RETRO Instruments (<http://www.retroinstruments.com>): 2A3 Dual Program EQ

REVIEWED BY F. REID SHIPPEN [ / ]REVIEWS / BY / F-REID-SHIPPEN

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This story begins badly, but stick with it; it gets better. Naturally, I was amped to fondle the new RETRO 2A3 Dual Program EQ, whose circuits are based on one of my favorites, the venerable Pultec EQP-1A3. I would like to pretend that I'm an unbiased reviewer; I'm not. I love both the RETRO Sta-Level (Tape Op #61) and the 176 (#66), and I expected to feel the same about the 2A3. A few months ago, I got the unit, plugged it in, ran some stuff through it, and... Hate is a strong word, really, one that should be reserved for things like Nazis and Teletubbies and people who don't use turn signals. I didn't hate it, but I didn't like it — insofar as I expected it was going to sound like a clone of a Pultec. It didn't. I picked a great vocal track and ran it through my vintage EQP-1A3. Sweet. Plugged through the RETRO. Meh. Actually, the low end sounded pretty great. It was nice and thick and solid and not mushy but pillowy smooth, in a tube-ish way. But the top end wasn't Magic. And that's what I was hoping for. So I emailed RETRO and reported thusly, figuring that would be that; they'd tell me I was crazy, deaf, or both, thereby ending another chapter of the Things That Try to Sound Like Pultecs and Don't. But Phil Moore is a persistent cat and he wouldn't take meh for an answer.

Did I mention that this was an extremely early prototype of the unit? Sorry. This was an extremely early prototype of the unit. So, I emailed Phil and said, "Phil, the low end is nice but the top end isn't Magic." He asked, "What does Magic mean?" I responded, "Hell if I know but that's what happens to the high end when I run stuff through my EQP-1A3, and I can't get it out of the 2A3. Sorry." Phil responded, "Don't be sorry, I want to hear what you're hearing, so just ship me your Pultec."

Who does stuff like this? Over a course of the next few months, my EQP and the 2A3 made a couple of cross-country trips. Measurements were made and listening done. I'm guessing that he's also probably shot out every available transformer and tube out there for this thing too; the process really feels thorough. Finally, after a few revisions, the final RETRO 2A3 arrived back at my studio — the same version shipping today. So, does it sound great? Yes, it does. Does it sound like a Pultec?

No, it doesn't. Let's rest this — nothing is ever going to, just like nothing Fender makes today is going to sound like a good 1964 Jazz bass. I've heard painstakingly exact copies of vintage Pultec EQs, replicated

down to the transformer windings, and they don't sound like a vintage Pultec. Or at least like mine. I'm pretty sure nobody knows why really, if it's aged components or the iron in the transformers or the ghosts in the machine. And there's a good argument that no two vintage pieces sound the same anyway. But Pultec addicts know that there's a select few that just sound like, well, Magic.

The sparkle on the top end is great. I use it in series with my Pultec on every vocal I mix and will keep it there until someone shoots me and steals it. The highest band is phenomenal; it's not the Pultec Magic glow thingy, it's the Open and Airy and Effortless thing way up high that really makes a great vocal shine and sound open and yet cut through without hurting. And this is a beautiful thing, because this characteristic translates really well to things like overheard, acoustic guitar, piano, strings, and the like. It's a really great top-end boost, up there with vintage Pultec, the Cello Palette, and the Sontec Mastering EQ.

The midrange is my favorite part of this box. It's my personal opinion that the midrange of the RETRO 2A3 is the best I've ever heard. It's a difficult range to do well, and the RETRO nails it. Vocal and guitar definition for days. It's eminently usable, and that's a blessing, as most midrange EQs can get really harsh or barksy, and this one is smooth and present at the same time. Honestly, I was really shocked. (Even the first iteration had amazing midrange.) It's worth owning for that alone.

The bass is sweet and tight, but the best part here is the addition of the subsonic filter switch. There are two settings — 40 Hz and 90 Hz. The 90 Hz filter does rolloff, sure, but switching in the 40 Hz filter does Magic. Paradoxically, it makes the bass sound tighter and fuller and better; it feels like there's more sub bass, not less, but it's not boomy — it's just killer. And it works on vocals, bass, guitars, the whole mix — you name it. It's a revolutionary addition — and improvement — to the venerable Pultec circuit. Apparently, it uses an interstage transformer that colors stuff and a sharp cutoff or whatever — I don't actually care. I just know this is the magic bullet for the old Pultec LF issue where the wide curves force subsonic garbage into overdrive and you lose headroom and things get all muddy and sloppy. 40 Hz rolloff switch — problem solved. It makes the whole unit sound better. I can't wait to cut kick drum with this thing. And electric guitars — a Neve Class-A preamp, Sennheiser MD 409, and RETRO 2A3 sounds fantastic on a guitar cab.

If you're still in the recording business, you're online, so surf to RETRO's site to stare at all the lovely frequencies and switches and geek stuff. The build is standard RETRO, which is to say, it's totally overbuilt, super-heavy-duty, and gorgeous to look at. It's also heavy as hell; it must be all the custom transformers in this thing. They stuck with the killer hash marks on the panel that make it super-easy to read and recall. XLR I/O is also nice. I urged a mono/stereo switch in place of the power switch (who turns off tube gear anyway?) but got shot down. I'd love to see an option for Goldpoint switches in place of pots for mastering guys and control freaks, and apparently, that option may be in the cards. I lobbied for some different frequencies, but really, why mess with the slightly expanded (14, 6, and — thank God — 1.5 kHz AKA bass growl) kid-tested, mother-approved ones on there? Honestly, I'd love to see this in a modular format at some point; I would likely build a 4-band unit with one Low, two Mids, and one High section — especially for vocals. I'd also love to see a High/Low stereo-only model for mix bus. I can easily see myself owning more than one of these in the future; it really is that good, and I use it on every song I mix. So, as an apology for my earlier rant, dear RETRO 2A3 Dual Program EQ, you know that when I hate you, it is

because I love you to a point of passion that unhinges my soul. (Apologies to Julie de Lespinasse.) (\$3750 street; www.retroinstruments.com)

-F. Reid Shippen,



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BY F. REID SHIPPEN [\[/REVIEWS/BY/F-REID-SHIPPEN\]](#)

I never really set out to "review" gear, per se; it just sits around the studio until it fights its way into the workflow. I'm sure that wears out the guys who send me the stuff, but it's really my...

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BY

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BY DAVE AMELS (/REVIEWS/BY/DAVE-AMELS)

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BY ANDY HONG (/REVIEWS/BY/ANDY-HONG)

This is a fantastic-sounding EQ. It's not a surgical tool, and given the density of knobs on the front of its real-estate-limited 500-series faceplate, setting the controls is not a precise affair...

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BY MARC ALAN GOODMAN (/REVIEWS/BY/MARC-ALAN-GOODMAN)

Finding myself in what seems to be the largest surge of interesting studio gear development in history, I'm always surprised when someone asks me if a piece of gear does enough. Maybe it's the fact...

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BY MARTIN CHITTUM (/REVIEWS/BY/MARTIN-CHITTUM)

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BY DAVE HIDEK (/REVIEWS/BY/DAVE-HIDEK)

I'm a fan of compressors that bring something to the table other than transparency, so I've had an eye on the legendary ADR F769X-R Vocal Stressor, an early outboard "channel strip" incorporating the...

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BY LARRY CRANE (/REVIEWS/BY/LARRY-CRANE)

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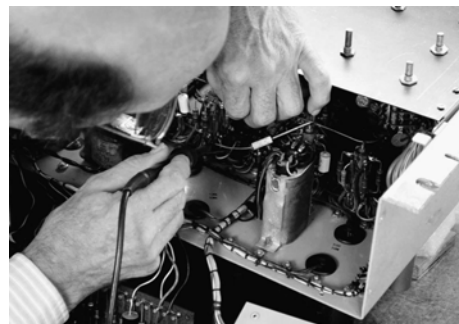
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BY JOHN BACCIGALUPPI (/ARTICLES/BY/JOHN-BACCIGALUPPI), LARRY CRANE (/ARTICLES/BY/LARRY-CRANE)

Bill Cheney and Jim Romney are the men responsible for keeping the amazing legacy of Spectra Sonics, a legendary, if criminally unheralded, pro-audio company alive.



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BY LARRY CRANE [/ARTICLES/BY/LARRY-CRANE]

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