

SONIC FARM CREAMER PLUS

Unconventional Preamp Produces Exquisite Timbres

Most preamps have a distinct sonic signature. The Sonic Farm Creamer Plus has several, and they're all gorgeous. The 2-channel tube preamp offers multiple I/O topologies, filters and impedance controls for coloring mic, line and instrument signals in sundry ways.

To preclude phase shift and oscillation that would soften transients, the single-rackspace Creamer Plus shuns input-gain pots, using for each channel one EF86 pentode tube as its sole active gain stage. The tradeoff in this design is that input levels—and tube saturation—can't be finely adjusted to the decibel inside the box.

Each of Creamer Plus' mic inputs is balanced using an oversize, Mu metal-shielded Cinemag transformer that passively boosts the signal 20 or 26 dB, depending on a switch setting. The Class-A EF86 tube can operate in either triode or pentode mode, each providing a distinctive sound and additional gain (33 dB for pentode mode and 24 dB for triode).

To preserve its euphonious harmonic distortion (which can exceed 1 percent before clipping), the tube stage is followed by a discrete, high-voltage transistor buffer. A second (discrete) transistor buffer drives the channel's output transformer. The preamp's line input feeds a separate 1:1 (unity-gain), Mu metal-shielded transformer (a Cinemag CMLI-15/15B), bringing the total number of transformers for each channel to three.

Each channel's output transformer has a nickel-iron alloy core on standard units, but you can order a pure nickel or iron transformer for both channels or substitute an iron transformer for only channel 2. Compared to nickel transformers, iron cores—which my review unit sported on both channels—typically produce softer high frequencies reminiscent of vintage timbres. For a cleaner but less creamy tone, you can switch the output transformer out of the circuit, substituting a solid-state IC for balancing.

ABUNDANT CONTROLS

Each channel of the Creamer Plus (see Fig. 1) features pushbutton switches that activate 48-volt phantom power, pad the mic-input signal 15 dB, select transformer or solid-state output balancing, choose triode or pentode mode, flip phase (at the output, affecting all inputs) and boost the input signal an extra 6 dB. The 6dB-boost setting, effected by the mic input's transformer, also reduces impedance by 75 percent, changing the mic's tone.

Depressing a Gain Up pushbutton switch bypasses the tube



Figure 1: Creamer Plus packs a legion of sound-sculpting controls onto its beautiful front panel.



Figure 2: Creamer Plus' rear panel sports connections for mic inputs and line I/O.

circuit's cathode with a capacitor, increasing musical non-linearity and adding roughly 5 dB of gain in triode and 9 dB in pentode mode. A large, plastic, chicken-head knob controls a pot that attenuates gain driving the output buffer and transformer; it doesn't affect tube gain. All told, the Creamer Plus can provide up to 74 dB of gain—more than most other preamps.

A line/instrument pushbutton switch alternately selects mic (switch set to out position) and line or instrument input (switch in). When you plug an instrument into a channel's 1/4-inch unbalanced instrument jack on Creamer Plus' front panel while the line/instrument switch is pushed in, the line input is disabled.

Each channel also provides five three-way switches. The Impedance switch selects one of three different impedances—modified further if you activate the pad or +6dB switch—for mic input. A Fat switch kicks in shelving-EQ boost below either 400 or 600 Hz, depending on its position, and an Air switch effects shelving boost above 2.2 or 7 kHz; the center position for each filter switch bypasses its filter. The shelving filters have 6dB/octave slopes and use the tube gain stage. You can adjust their boost by turning two trim pots—accessed by tiny holes in the chassis' top panel—using a mini-slot or hex screwdriver; maximum gain is approximately 4.5 dB in triode mode and 9 dB in pentode. Another switch selects 160 Hz, 80 Hz or bypass for a 6dB/octave, passive highpass filter. One more switch attenuates the output of the tube 0, 6 or 12 dB. Attenuating the tube's output precludes having to use the output-level pot near the bottom of its range—where its

TRY THIS

When recording an extremely sibilant, shrill-sounding singer, try activating Creamer Plus' Gain Up circuit. High-frequency detail will be dramatically softened, taming fricatives and creating a creamy sound.

action is imprecise—when negotiating hot signals; that’s especially important for use in mastering sessions.

When lit, the preamp’s LEDs indicate the unit is powered up, 48V phantom power is applied, signal is present (green LED) or clipping the tube (red), and pentode mode is selected. The power switch is on the front panel.

On the rear panel, each channel sports a mic and line input and an output by way of balanced XLR connectors (six connections in total for the two channels; see Fig. 2).

Maximum output level is 32 dBu. The frequency response is stated to be 10 Hz to 50 kHz, ± 3 dB.

MAKING TRACKS

I deliberately recorded tracks using solid-state mics so I could see what Creamer Plus’ glowing tubes added to their sound. A woolly-sounding male vocalist—recorded using an AKG TLII condenser in omni mode—sounded incredible in pentode mode with solid-state output. The sound was remarkably clear and detailed for sounding so extraordinarily lush—this is Creamer Plus’ hallmark. The Air 1 (2.2kHz) filter setting added sweet and silvery highs.

The Gain Up circuit smoothly rounded the sound of my electric guitar, a ’62 Strat played through a Roland MicroCube amp miked with a Shure SM57. For this track, I preferred the subtly thicker-sounding triode mode over the pentode mode and chose the creamy-sounding transformer output. The result sounded wonderfully lush and spotlighted the midrange, discarding any high-frequency glassiness.

I got a wide variety of DI’d electric bass tones—all superb—using Creamer Plus’ instrument input. Selecting Fat 1 (boost below 400 Hz), Gain Up, pentode mode and solid-state output produced a burpy growl and thunderous yet tight low end—possibly the best tone I’ve ever heard using this particular instrument (a 30-year-old passive Kramer Pioneer).

LINE INS AT MIXDOWN

Even set to the lower-gain triode mode, Creamer Plus’ tubes overloaded when its line inputs were fed roughly 24 dB (2 dB below full scale) from my digital mixer’s stereo bus. Raising the output-level knob past the 3:15 o’clock position disguised clipping indi-

PRODUCT SUMMARY

COMPANY: Sonic Farm

PRODUCT: Creamer Plus

WEBSITE: sonicfarm.com

PRICE: \$2,650 (factory-direct)

PROS: Sounds superb. Highly versatile and feature-packed. Plenty of gain and only one-rack-space high.

CONS: Can’t finely adjust input levels. Line inputs might distort with hot mix-bus levels.

cation by unjustifiably turning the overload LED’s color from red to green. Sonic Farm explained that cranking the pot when the tube is clipping makes the tube buffer clip at a lower level, causing the overload LED to falsely indicate signal is under the clipping threshold. This can cause you to overlook clipping if you’re not listening intently.

Routing subgrouped drums through Creamer Plus’ line inputs, the effect was subtle until I drove the tubes to saturation by goosing the subgroup’s send level. With the overload LEDs barely flickering red on some peaks, Creamer Plus lent wonderful tube compression to the sound. The drums sounded more aggressive and colorful, and I could make them much louder in the mix without snare hits clipping my mix bus. Despite the added glue, transients remained remarkably crisp and punchy through the preamp’s solid-state outputs; transformer outputs tended to round the traps’ transients too much for my taste. Kick drum sounded a hair more focused in pentode mode, while triode mode lent a bit more upper-bass heft to snare hits. The Fat filters’ corner frequencies were too high to allow bolstering the kick’s punch without also blurring the low-midrange.

If you only need a preamp for tracking, consider Creamer Plus’ two-channel sibling, the more affordable Creamer Standard. Creamer Standard lacks the Plus’ line inputs, shelving filters and tube-output attenuator switches.

Chockablock with sound-sculpting features and spawning tones that brim with saturated color and detail, Creamer Plus is one of the most musical and versatile tube preamps available today. If I could buy only one tube preamp for my studio, Creamer Plus would be the one. ■

Mix contributing editor Michael Cooper is the owner of Michael Cooper Recording in Sisters, Oregon.