

sta-level gold edition compressor

REPRINT FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2006 ISSUE OF TAPE OP MAGAZINE

"The vintage craze is far from over. The more we try to make audio perfect, the more we realize that imperfection makes more interesting recordings. In many ways, tubes are far less superior to solid-state, so why are tubes still hanging in there? Could it be the sound? It's true you can record without going through transformers, wires, and tubes—but should you? Why does everyone still fall all over themselves for Fairchilds and LA-2As? It seems the more things change, the more the old stuff is desired. The original Gates STA-LEVEL is a good example. Built as a broadcast compressor, it does what the name implies—keep things level—which was and still is very important in broadcasting radio signals. It doesn't just compress, it limits big-time, safeguarding against transmitter overload. While it did end up in studios, it never achieved that same status as other "must have" vintage units, so it's always been a bit esoteric. Working examples are oftentimes quite noisy, contributing to its below-the-radar usage and desire. People who own one, however, cherish them and use them faithfully—as a little hiss should never stop you from using something that does its job so well. It's basically two knobs—input and output—and a variable release switch, a meter that shows compression only, and no bypass switch. Since it was designed to prevent peaks from clipping broadcast amplifiers, it does not need anything more than that to perform its job.

Now along comes Phil Moore and Retro Instrument's recreation of the classic STA-LEVEL. It's updated in all the right ways—more modern and reliable electronics where appropriate and faithful to the original with the circuit design, tubes, and transformers. My unit came with a variable release knob in place of the original "single and double" switch and an added 3-position attack-speed selector on the inside. The size and shape are consistent with the original, including the ability to service it through the front of the unit when racked up. What Phil did that is perhaps the most brilliant is he built the unit to outlive the main compressing tube—the 6836 tube. The original STA-LEVEL was one of many compressors that used the same circuit design as the GE Unilevel. This design utilized the 6836 tube and was capable of 40 dB of gain reduction! Coupled with a 6V6 output stage capable of +24 dBm, you got one serious level controller. Retro has built the new STA-LEVEL around that circuit and tube, but knowing that those tubes only exist as new old stock, Phil has wisely added another tube option to use when you can no longer find the originals. The 6386 tube mounts on the rear or you can open the unit up and use two matched 6BJ6 tubes in the empty sockets inside instead. He has even provided a balance nulling button so you can perform a simple circuitry balance test yourself to see if any components are getting weak—like the tubes! Now obviously, part of the vintage charm is the sound of the original tube, but Retro has made sure that if you do have to switch to the new tubes, it will still sound and behave the same. As most of us look at quality, higher-priced pro audio equipment as an investment, this feature is very comforting.

And behave it does! The whole reason to have vintage compression is for the sound it adds, and the STA-LEVEL adds classic tone immediately. This thing is musical in a way that's hard to describe. Every engineer who has been in here since I got the unit has reacted the same way. Your jaw drops when you hear it. On lead vocals, you can put the input up all the way and see over 30 dB of gain reduction at the meter, and it does not sound squished. Instead, it drives the vocal into the mix in that perfect way—as in, "Look Ma, no fader riding necessary!" When the release knob is all the way left, the release time is so slow that it never gets to zero during the singing (well maybe during the guitar solo!) so it does not pump as it generally has not reached full recovery by the time the next signal shows up. What's really cool is that you don't hear the noise floor rising with the recovery, so it's not adding more hash into the track. I discovered this by turning up the input all the way for maximum compression and trying to get it to distort or misbehave. I could not do it. My eyes told me that according to the meter, I was compressing the living hell out of the track, but my ears did not believe it. So many times in a mix, I've struggled with getting that little vocal nuance out and making that word at the end of a phrase distinguishable. Not anymore. Once you've tweaked in the input level and attack and release times to your satisfaction, just drive up the output to the level you want the vocal to sit at, and leave it alone. Done. Now you can keep your mind free to worry about that shaker level everyone is so concerned with.

For tracking, the STA-LEVEL is great on bass as it actually maintains the low end and really smoothes out the performance—something about the circuit adding subsonic transients. It's technical stuff that gear designers and circuit heads enjoy explaining to you, so go to the website and read up on it if you are interested. All I know is it lives up to the hype on the low end. The STA-LEVEL is great for busy players who use too many strings and notes. Even better with actual bass players who believe in using the bass for low notes! On acoustic guitar, you can hit it very hard, and the guitar still sounds like an acoustic and not a thwacking, pumping, midrange assault that can result from too much reduction with a lot of compressors I've used in the past. On piano, it really shined. The way it handled the dynamics and harmonics of the piano was really satisfying. The passage we used it on had a minimal verse section that went into a pounding two-handed chorus with thick chords. The dynamic swing was extreme between the two sections. The STA-LEVEL allowed us to get the level of the verse section up while holding the chorus level in check and preventing tape overload. And yet, the two sections still sounded dynamically different—appropriately light but now present on the verse and gloriously loud on the chorus. At mix, no extra processing was needed. I put the fader up so that the chorus was at the proper level, and the verse part sat perfectly. I can't wait for some horn players to come in to see what magic we can add in then. I really dig finding a compressor I'm not afraid to use heavily while tracking.

Of course, there is a way to stereo couple two units, and I'm thinking that would be pretty great as according to the web blurb, the threshold is more sensitive by 6 dB when presented with L+R signals, and since I only had one unit, I could not verify that fact. But seeing as how everything else behaved and sounded as claimed on my demo unit, I'm sure that two together is pretty bitchin'. The Gold Edition I evaluated with the extra release and attack controls is now how all production units are being shipped, so Phil has responded to the feedback from the engineers who checked out the first units and already improved it. The Retro Instruments STA-LEVEL is the real deal. This is no made-in-China rip off. This is a quality piece of recording equipment that is true to its heritage in sound, performance, and classic design. I personally guarantee that you will fall in love with this compressor, and if you don't, you should have your ears checked out. It will make your recordings and mixes sound better. The unit is available through vintagekingaudio.com. They are produced in small batches and made with love, so please be patient with Retro when ordering!" —Craig Schumacher



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TAPE OP
The Creative Music Recording Magazine