



Softube **PC** **MAC**

# Passive-Active Pack £146

This EQ bundle takes its inspiration from a couple of rare consoles and also offers up a fresh take on equalisation

## System requirements

**PC** PIII CPU, Windows XP/Vista/7, 512MB RAM, VST/RTAS host

**Mac** PPC/Intel CPU, OS X 10.4, 512MB RAM, VST/AU/RTAS host

> Swedish software designers Softube made their mark a couple of years ago with Vintage Amp Room, a guitar amp modelling plug-in. Since then, they've applied their DSP mastery to various designs, including the Abbey Road Brilliance Pack (cm138, 9/10). The Passive-Active Pack continues on the EQ tip, containing three plug-ins, each with a specific angle. One is based on active circuitry (modelled on the Filtek Labo Mk5 desk EQ) and one on a passive design (modelled on the Neumann PEV 930 desk EQ). The third, Focusing Equalizer, combines both circuitry types in a variable frequency design.

## Two's company...

It may seem a little odd releasing a three-plug-in bundle when you could simply combine all options in one interface. Softube are upfront about this, saying they aimed to recreate not just the sound but the simplicity of classic analogue designs. This certainly applies to the Passive and Active Equalizers. The former is the simplest, with three bands: low shelf, high shelf and mid-range presence. The two shelves are fixed (60Hz and 10kHz) and the mid-range offers

seven fixed frequencies (700Hz to 5.6kHz). Both shelves have stepped 3dB cut and boost, with the presence boost only in 2dB gradations.

The Active Equalizer is more flexible, offering three slightly overlapping parametric bands and high- and low-cut filters (18dB/octave). Once again, the controls adjust the gain in steps (2dB this time), with up to 16dB boost or cut. To round things off, each parametric band has two Q settings: sharp and wide.

The Focusing Equalizer is more complex and can operate in either passive or active mode (based on the same modelled units). However, the three bands work differently. The upper and lower shelving bands are boost-only, with cut or boost for the mid-range. These work in conjunction with the high- and low-cut filters, and moving the cutoff points of these actually affects the EQ frequencies of the three bands. The plug-in is rounded off with a three-flavour variable saturation control.

## Passive aggressive

So, how do they sound? The Passive EQ has a real point-and-shoot simplicity to it. We found



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this particularly effective on acoustic guitar, with boosts on the low and high bands scooping out the mids. In typical passive style, you'll also find that there's interplay between the bands, and a sharpening Q on the presence band as you reach maximum boost. Obviously, it's no good for surgical tasks, but it's a great choice for sweetening your masters or making broad tonal changes.

The Active EQ sounds completely different, emphasising the difference in the underlying (virtual) circuits. The dual Q options per band enable much more accurate EQing, and with 16dB to play with, we were easily able to completely reshape some test drum loops. The narrow Q option gives particularly sharp results and is great for adding punch to lifeless kicks and snares. This plug-in temporarily indicates currently selected values above the meters - something that the Passive EQ doesn't do. Finally, you'll find that if you boost like frequencies using two different bands, you *won't* get a crazy doubling up of gain, and this helps keep overloads at bay.

## Coming into focus

With the same underlying passive and active algorithms as the other plug-ins, the Focusing Equalizer's point of interest has to be its variable frequency system. Softube advise you to use the high/low-cut filter sliders to set upper and lower limits for your sound, and this in turn dictates where the EQ bands operate - as you narrow the range, the low/mid/high bands move to target that area.

The sound of the cut filters also follows the global active/passive setting, with the passive ones being much gentler (6dB/octave) than those of the active mode. The 'sliding' display (which looks just like an old-school radio tuner) depicts only the cutoff frequencies here - there are no other frequency indicators, and with no markings on the controls and no feedback above the meters, you really have to rely on your ears. Indeed, to further investigate, we even loaded up a frequency analyser.

In practice, however, we found it best to treat these units like old-school hardware, tweaking until the sound is good, rather than obsessing over frequency values. Used in this way, the



Softube make a number of cool plug-ins, including the FET Compressor (top) and Tube-Tech CL 1B

## Home on the range

Although the Passive-Active Pack is the first Softube-branded product we've reviewed in *Computer Music*, the company produce a wide selection of native plug-ins. Recently, they've released the FET Compressor and the Tube-Tech CL 1B. The former sports the retro brushed metal looks of the Passive-Active Pack and is based on the classic Urei 1776, while the latter is an official emulation of the hardware of the same name. Coming soon is an official Trident A-Range EQ to complement the EQ pack reviewed here. On the reverb and delay front, they have the surprisingly adjustable Spring Reverb and Tube Delay effects.

Beyond that, it's all about guitars, with the three Amp Room plug-ins: Vintage, Metal and Bass. Each one features recreations of classic industry-standard amps and boasts a rather nifty 3D interface. You'll also find reasonably flexible click-and-drag mic positioning. What you don't get is an enormous list of amps (the Bass plug-in is simply one amp head and three cabinets). However, what these lack in options they more than make up for in realism, being more lifelike than many other amp simulations. Softube also have an Acoustic Feedback plug-in, which makes a pretty good stab at artificially creating feedback.

Focusing EQ offers all the flavour of the other two plug-ins, with greater flexibility. Its saturation effect is also a winner, with the Keep Low and Keep High settings helping you avoid damage to low and high frequencies. It's only a shame that there's no saturation bypass switch, for easy A/B comparison.

Overall, the Passive-Active Pack is a great piece of work from Softube, designed with vision but also with full regard for the sound of some pretty rare kit. What's more, the price tag is considerably more modest than comparable top-flight analogue emulations. **cm**

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Complete with brushed aluminium finish, the Passive Equalizer provides that retro vibe in both look and sound

## Alternatively

**Universal Audio Harrison 32C**  
**cm138 >> 9/10 >> \$249**

Just one of the UAD DSP platforms excellent analogue-modelled EQs

**PSP Audioware sQuad**  
**cm138 >> 9/10 >> \$249**

Brilliant EQ pack, recently bolstered by the addition of a fifth unit

## Verdict

**For** Unusual source EQs  
Great-sounding Passive EQ  
Novel Focusing EQ design  
Good price

**Against** Focusing EQ labelling limited  
No cut filters on passive EQ  
No saturation bypass switch

Softube have served up three wonderful examples of just how good modern analogue-modelling plug-ins can be

9/10