



It's may have a Big mode, but its own size is a space-saving 1U.

COMPRESSOR

Drawmer 1968 Mercenary Edition

Drawmer continue to defy the computer recording revolution with quality outboard. **Tim Oliver** steps back in time to 1968...

DETAILS

DRAWMER 1968 MERCENARY EDITION COMPRESSOR

PRICE £993

CONTACT

Tel: 01924 378669
Web: www.drawmer.com

TECH SPEC

Balanced +4dB XLR inputs and outputs
Input impedance: 20kOhms
Output impedance: 50 Ohms
Bandwidth: <17Hz to 28kHz, -1dB, <10Hz to 47kHz, -3dB
Distortion (THD and noise) @1kHz: <0.35 per cent
Dimensions: 482 x 44 x 225mm (1U)
Weight: 4kg

DRAWMER HAVE THE most instantly recognisable, generic appearance of any products in the industry, and the 1968 doesn't stray from the trodden path. It looks like a Drawmer, and that's almost enough said: at 1U it's a hybrid of the 'vintage' look of the firm's 60s range and the 'classic' look of their Pro series. Like all their products it's solid and sturdily built.

This new edition is designed primarily as a stereo mix compressor but at the same time is perfectly

more affordable plug-in? Well, like the 1969, the 1968 uses a J-FET gain reduction circuit. That's a specialised solid-state design with attack times as fast, if not faster, than opto-isolator compressors such as the classic 1176. It's a soft-knee compressor, so there's no Ratio control and a variable Threshold governs the amount of compression relative to a fixed input level.

The output stage uses a single 12AX7 valve that gives up to 20dB of gain make-up. Attack times range from 2ms to 50ms over six fixed

100Hz roll-off applied to the sidechain, to prevent over-compression caused by the low frequencies of kick drums and bass parts. 'Big' refers to the fact that the sound stays much more consistent and open, rather than being pumped closed by heavy bass.

The two channels of compression can be used individually or in linked stereo operation, in which case the left channel controls both sides of the stereo set-up. The only other notably unusual feature is the +10dB VU meter switch, which adjusts the

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suited to individual instruments. Gone are the mic pre-amps and the DI section, and its size has been reduced to 1U to save rack space.

Drawmer are swimming against the tide of internal software mixing and a more obvious development would be to add EQ to the 1969 to capitalise on the front-end recording channel users. Clearly they wouldn't take the opposite path without doing their research, so what's the magic ingredient that's going to make us want one of these over a handy and

settings, and Release times have three fixed settings (100ms, 500ms and 1sec) and three variable settings, depending on the signal input.

Sidechain access is provided by stereo jack sockets on the rear allowing de-essing and other relative compression operations such as ducking. An internal frequency-conscious compression device called Big, which was first seen on the 1969, has been extended to each individual channel. This involves a High Pass Filter with a

meters to show 10dB below normal level – this is to take into account the high levels of stereo output signals these days. Usefully, the VU up-light glows red as the input signal approaches clipping.

First compressions

Seeing as the 1968 is principally a stereo bus compressor, I first tried it out across a whole mix with the Big mode switched in. Without much in the way of adjustments I was struck by the combination of openness and

ALTERNATIVES

There's little out there that can be directly compared to the 1968 in terms of quality and price but here are a couple of other dual-channel valve compressors to show the price (and quality) variation:

TUBE-TECH CL2A

£2999

A major piece of gear – for a major price.

www.tube-tech.com

TLA 5021

£470

A lot easier on the pocket, but you get what you pay for.

www.tlaudio.co.uk

immediacy that it brought to the picture – almost the sonic equivalent of expensive widescreen. I think I was lucky with settings because simple changes to any of the three main parameters had a severe impact and not necessarily for the better, especially, and not surprisingly, the Threshold.

Switching out Big had a profound affect on the size of the sound, completely justifying its moniker. It provides a very even and upfront high- and mid-range that's utterly unaffected by the bass end, so you don't get the vocal modulation that can be so off-putting.

As a drum bus compressor it was equally useful, particularly for a general tightening and warming of the whole kit – though I didn't find it so good as some others for the more brutal drum compression I like. Also, for some, the switchable attack settings might not be fine enough for precision drum compression.

One of the hardest instruments to compress well is an acoustic guitar and I know few compressors that can cut it; you invariably get an ugly attack envelope and high-end modulation. The 1968 is just great for it, however. The fast attack times and the Big setting ease the pain of all those side-effects and can make even a cheap acoustic sound classy.

For vocals, the 1968 is up there with the best, giving a transparent

Drawmer versus Mercenary Audio

The story begins back in 1983 when Drawmer introduced the 1960 Tube Compressor/Mic preamp/DI, a dual-channel unit that was way ahead of its time. It not only initiated the valve 'big and warm' revival but was also essentially the first 'voice channel', albeit with a very limited EQ, allowing a super-short recording chain between microphone and tape. It also had an instrument DI section with a great sounding Drive feature, which was perfect for quick and easy electric guitar tones.

In 2000 Drawmer teamed up with Mercenary Audio, a US company led by producer/engineer Fletcher after he "had a lot to say" about the 1960. They came out with the 1969, which looks much the same as the 1960 on the outside but with many changes to the internal workings. Rumour has it that Mercenary have no financial interest in the product, purely the desire for perfection. Admirable, but what's with the name then?

Now, five years later, Drawmer have bowed to public demand and launched this stripped down version, the 1968. We'll ignore the old joke about 69 and 68.

but thoroughly controlled result on the two different singers I tested it with. The operation is so smooth you don't hear it working, and the valve warmth and upfrontness easily get the close intimacy we all love to hear.

To sum up...

Much has changed since the original 1960: I liked its DI section but not much else. Thankfully the 1968 is light years better than the 1960 and on a level with all the great names of the past and present. Its smooth, transparent operation and warm open sound launch it into the top flight. Not only is it a fine mix compressor, with the Big setting living up to its name, but with its fast attack time it's also great for vocals and acoustic instruments.

It's certain to find appeal in major studios but – as good as it is –

I find it hard to see a wider base for a back-end processor, considering so many people are working entirely in Pro Tools for the convenience of recall. That said, for the well-oiled, it would marry up well to a pair of high-end mic amps and make a sublime recording path. One for the lottery win, then. **FM**

HEAR IT ON THE FMDVD

Find out more from page 8

VERDICT DRAWMER 1968

BUILD QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



EASE OF USE



VERSATILITY



QUALITY OF RESULTS



A quality, high-end compressor that's up there with the best – with a price that reflects this.

WITH ITS FAST ATTACK TIME
IT'S GREAT FOR VOCALS AND
ACOUSTIC INSTRUMENTS

