


ALTA MODA UNICOMP

Just another fancy compressor or versatile green monster?

Text: Andy Stewart



 I really wanted to dislike this compressor. And when I mean dislike it, I really mean I wanted to *hate* this thing! With so much money currently tied up in analogue compressors and other assorted outboard equipment, the Alta Moda Unicom wasn't something I wanted to discover a 'need' for. Bolting it reluctantly into the rack would therefore have to be only the first stage in a disciplined two-stage process, the second stage of which would involve *unbolting* it and marching it out the door before I got to know it, like it or want it. But life just doesn't work like that sometimes...

The Alta Moda Unicom is a sophisticated, fully discrete, high voltage, complex, FET-based, Class-A, linkable dual-mono compressor featuring a capacitor-free audio signal path, feed-forward and feed-back compression topologies, and RMS and peak rectifier modes. It's a clean green compressing machine that offers truly versatile performance from a single comprehensive unit.

More than capable of acting as a mastering or mix bus compressor (stereo linked or otherwise) the Unicom can provide clear and subtle control over full-range dynamic work, while at the same time ensuring the audio passing through the unit remains full-bodied, open and powerful. There's no loss of energy in the bottom end as a result of shortcomings in the circuit design like many compressors on the market – it's fast, responsive and polished in the extreme. But that's just the beginning.

COMP THAT

Switching the Unicom over to act on just one or two individual components of a mix opens you up to a world of not-so-subtle compression setups that provide you with several mix options, many of which are simply beyond the scope of the majority of compressors on the market. The Alta Moda Unicom provides a wide-open landscape where audio can be controlled, distorted, clipped, nurtured, hammered, made thinner or fatter... all depending on what you're trying to do within the context of a mix.

To describe the Unicom's various controls and how they perform, I thought it might make for a slightly less tedious read to use an example of a double bass to interrogate all the knobs, buttons and switches on its glamorous and ergonomic front panel.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

As many of you may have experienced, double bass can be a hard instrument to control in a mix, especially within the context of a high-energy rock track. As a close friend of mine often says about

this instrument in rock, "the best way to mix double bass is to replace it with a Fender Precision." Given that this approach wasn't an option, the Unicom was patched in and quickly provided the double bass with articulation, substantial amounts of control and an entirely new attitude.

The particular double bass in question had *lots* of dynamic range and an irregular tone... nothing new there. It was difficult to get it to sit in the mix at all, let alone have it function as the foundation of the track; one minute it was there like a ship's fog horn, the next minute it was lost in the mist.

The Unicom was employed to provide fast acting, hard-knee compression at a ratio of 7:1, with a moderate threshold setting, a reasonably fast release and up to 10 or 12dB of gain reduction. There's a choice on the top row of the Unicom's controls between 'Peak' mode (which is better for fast transients in many cases) and 'RMS' mode (arguably better for overall level reduction), as well as feed-forward or feed-back compression topologies – both of which can be chosen at the press of a nicely proportioned luminous green button [Issue 68's *On The Bench* has more on how these compression topologies work]. For the double bass setup, the Unicom was configured as a 'feed-back' compressor responding to 'peak' signals, which locked the bass down well, with virtually no pumping side-effects or collapsing of the output signal.

But in the context of the mix, the bass was also fairly expressionless. In truth, it was wholly underwhelming and lacklustre. Simply compressing it a bit would have made very little difference to the overall outcome. What it was begging for was a parallel mix of some sort of distorted duplicate signal to give it some attitude and clarity. So instead of establishing a 'mult', as I normally would, and pushing up a distorted and compressed bass channel split via a Sansamp or similar, I engaged the Unicom's 'Drive' control.

The Drive control is the first knob along the second row and is only active in the side-chain if it's switched in with the green button immediately to its right. 'Drive' (formerly labelled 'Warmth' on earlier Unicom models) adds second-order harmonic distortion to the gain cell of the compressor – a little or a lot depending on the amount you dial in, and in this instance I had it cranked almost flat chat. This feature also has an associated three-position high-pass filter that acts upon it to drive either a full-range distortion signal through the side-chain, or one of two filtered options: the first rolling out the signal below 770Hz, the second acting above 1.3kHz. In this case I had the filter disengaged to allow the signal to be distorted across the full bandwidth of the signal. And with

the relatively high 7:1 ratio setting, the signal by this stage sounded seriously distorted, almost like a fuzz pedal.

The next manoeuvre involved engaging the 'Blend' control – again with a button – which added more of the original uncompressed bass signal directly to the output. This control also sports a high-pass filter, which again offers three positions: 'off', signal passing above 280Hz or 1.1kHz. For our bass channel, this filter was switched to engage the 1.1kHz filter, providing the ability to wind untreated high-mids and tops back into the output signal. This action restored clarity to the already heavily driven and compressed signal, effectively reducing the ratio of top-end treatment relative to the bottom end. The result was a superbly controlled, articulate and vivid bass sound that was worlds apart from its mashed potato-like original. The Blend masked the heavily distorted signal surprising well and the bass sat in the mix almost miraculously, providing a low-end foundation, consistency and even melody!

OTHER SOUNDS & FEATURES

The Unicomp's versatility extends to all kinds of sounds of course, not just bass. It worked nicely on everything from mad keyboard pads and drum subgroups, to gentle vocals and string sections. Once you get the hang of the way the compressor's various controls interact, the unit becomes fun to use, encouraging experimentation rather than inducing fear.

Admittedly, when you first approach the Unicomp you could be forgiven for mistaking it for a stereo parametric EQ, given the number of controls on its pale green faceplate. The only things that gives the game away from a distance are the fantastic white gain reduction meters in the centre of the unit. It's certainly not vintage looking as far as the knob count's concerned. If you're an LA-2A kind of person, the Unicomp might look a little scary at first, but I assure you it isn't. Assuming you know how to use a compressor, the Unicomp simply offers you more control over the signal, allowing your imagination to drive the outcome rather than having to rely on a 'classic' design that provides no scope for tweaking.

The trick with the Unicomp is to get two hands on the controls; I often worked the unit with one hand on the Blend control and another on the output. The difficulty with the unit is that adding Drive or Blend immediately increases the overall output volume, so controlling them simultaneously is the way to go... if you're cranking in lots of Blend, for example, you'll need to back off the output. Trickier still is the fact that none of the lower left-hand controls override their equivalents on the right-hand side when

you're in stereo-link mode, making stereo mode as complicated as dancing the pasa doble.

COMP-LEXITY

I suspect there are many engineers out there who might think that any compressor that allows you to get lost in all the settings and mangle a sound is missing the point of the device, but I disagree. Sure, a simple compressor that produces fabulous results every time is a great thing, but complex compressors shouldn't always be misinterpreted as being 'try-hard' or 'gimmicky'. Some are, but this one certainly isn't. The Unicomp doesn't trade away sound quality for increased versatility. I suspect these accusations are often borne out of fear anyway – some people hate devices that challenge their skill sets. Somehow the Unicomp manages to be both great sounding and highly tweakable.

COMP-LETING THE PICTURE

There's a lot more I could say about the Alta Moda Unicomp. It looks fantastic (apart from the two blindingly bright LEDs that blink the moment the compression detection circuit kicks in, acting more like disco strobes in low-light than mere indicators). It feels classy and well constructed (final assembly is done in Hawaii apparently, by the designer, Paul Ricchiuti). The dimpled aluminium knobs and gain reduction meters in particular give the unit an elegant individual look, while at the same time the aesthetic seems somehow timeless. The internals are beautifully constructed out of high quality components; the layout is clean, highly organised and eminently serviceable – no giant PCB boards featuring unrecognisable microscopic components here, just quality workmanship and parts. The Unicomp also has an external side-chain insert loop on rear mounted XLRs, which is armed via the front panel just below the Threshold control, and a side-chain filter that cuts in at 120 and 400Hz to allow even further manipulation of the compressor's sensitivity to bottom end.

All in all, this compressor is one sweet ride... I know that sounds tacky but it's true. It offers great sound performance with looks to match. I can't really fault it, apart from perhaps wishing the filters were able to tell you where their crossover points were and wishing the LED indicators could be toned down a bit. [Actually, just as we were going to press designer, Paul Ricchiuti, emailed to inform us that the newest production run of Unicomps has mellow green LEDs]. It's one of those compressors that feels like it might just become a secret weapon once you really got to know it. But I must resist the temptation for now... where the hell is that screwdriver? ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price
£4990

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Pros
Awesome sound.
Extremely versatile operation.
A worthy tracking, mixing or mastering tool.
Superb build quality inside and out.

Cons
Gain reduction indicator LEDs too bright.
Filters have no meaningful legending.
Stereo mode is complex.

Summary
The Unicomp is a classy compressor of the highest quality. It has high headroom, great compression control features, great looks and several tricks up its sleeve. It's no toy or one-trick pony, nor is it just a pretty face. If you need good analogue compression, regardless of where you work, check it out.

