

Alta Moda Audio HIPPO Stereo Bus Compressor

The Alta Moda HIPPO is a fantastic two-mix compressor that works well on virtually any audio source.

The Alta Moda HIPPO is a double-wide 500 Series stereo bus compressor. It is based on SSL's popular VCA topology and includes a host of features that provide both powerful and creative control of audio information. If you haven't heard of Alta Moda Audio, it's time to take notice. The US-based audio design company (with roots in Australia) has been designing and building gear since 2007 and, while nothing in their line is a household name (yet), they are making some of the best sounding audio devices that I have encountered. I've been using the HIPPO for the last several months and have loved every minute of it.

Features

The beautifully-designed HIPPO is robust and well made, and its layout is straightforward and intuitive. It includes dual, 20-segment gain-reduction meters with 1dB resolution and the familiar compression controls including Threshold, Ratio, Attack, Release, and Make Up. The Threshold control is continuously variable [-20 to +20] while the Makeup control is adjustable [+/- 15 dB in 3 dB intervals]. The Ratio selector offers six ratio options including the SSL-standard 2:1, 4:1 & 10:1 options and adds 1.5:1, 6:1 and 20:1 options. Attack time options are 0.1, 0.3, 1, 3, 10, and 30 mS and Release time options are 0.1, 0.3, 0.6, 1.2, 1.5 mS and Auto. My experience revealed the HIPPO to be a superior device in both control and sound and anyone comfortable with the SSL controls will immediately feel at home with the HIPPO.

The HIPPO's Side Chain Filter control engages a HP filter in the compressor's side-chain, preventing the compressor from over-reacting to low frequencies, thus providing better sound on bass-heavy material. The filter's shelf can be set to Off, 60Hz, 90Hz,

120Hz, 200Hz or 300Hz. The Blend function is a continuously variable control that allows internal parallel compression — i.e., some of the incoming uncompressed signal

[Dry] can be mixed with the compressed signal [Wet]. The six-position Warmth control allows varying degrees of harmonic distortion to be added to the audio signal. The control

can be switched off or set to one of five different levels of warmth. "The warmth is mostly second harmonic distortion and is created by taking the VCA out of its normal, pristine laser-trimmed state," explains Alta Moda's Paul Ricchiuti. "The warmth increases the distortion far into obvious levels. At the more extreme settings, 3rd harmonics come in as well."

The three-position Link Mode toggle switch determines how the detectors interact with each other and can be set to Dual, Soft or Hard. In Dual mode, each channel's detector functions independently providing two completely independent compressors with a single set of controls. In Soft mode, the detectors are loosely linked with the detectors employing minimal control over each other when compressing. And in Hard mode, the detectors are linked so that any change in one channel's dynamics will equally affect the other. The Bypass switch activates a relay implementing a true hardware bypass.



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In Use

When I first started using the HIPPO, I was expecting it to be just another reasonably good stereo bus compressor option, but not much more. After several months of use, I came to the conclusion that there isn't anything this wonder module doesn't sound good on. The box performs flawlessly on bus compression duties; I think this is its true strength.

When tracking drums, I've used it on overheads, rooms and snare; it has performed wonderfully in every instance. It performed brilliantly on piano and acoustic guitar and, in these instances, I found the Soft Link mode to be indispensable. The box also does a stellar job tightening up a bass guitar and smoothing out lead vocals.

Having only one set of controls makes using the box as a dual mono device (by setting the Link Mode to Dual) somewhat limiting (pun intended), but I've successfully used it on two electric guitars, two lead vocals, and on an acoustic guitar and vocal and had great results in each instance. When working in this unorthodox configu-

ration, I've found it best to use the HIPPO along with a mic pre that has a continuously variable gain control, allowing the preamp gain to essentially be used as a compressor input control. This is necessary: if I'm recording an acoustic guitar and a vocal through the HIPPO and I want to compress the acoustic guitar more, turning down the Threshold will cause the vocal to compress more as well; if I increase the input of the acoustic guitar into the HIPPO, it will be compressed more while leaving the vocal the same.

Setup is quick and easy. As with most stereo bus compressors I've used, I've found that dialing in the attack time while listening to the snare works well. I'll keep speeding up the attack time until the snare starts to disappear and then I'll back the time down one notch; results are nearly always golden. I typically set the release time as fast as I can without any noticeable pumping. This usually translates into faster release times with up-tempo songs and slower release times with the slower songs.

It's great having the HIPPO's additional ratio options. With other compressors, I usually set the ratio to 2:1, but there have been many times when I've longed for a smaller ratio and having the ability to switch from 2:1 to 1.5:1 is fantastic. The 20-segment meters are visually pleasing but I miss being able to use them to monitor input and output. I don't typically like the warmth feature on the stereo bus, but it is fantastic on drums and I've had great success using it on vocals and bass guitar while tracking as well.

Summary

The Alta Moda is a wonderful device perfectly suited for stereo bus compression but equally adept at controlling the gain of stereo or mono instruments or vocals. The device is easy to use and its price tag, even with the purchase of a 500-series power supply, is very reasonable.

Price: \$1,299

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