

Lisson Grove AR-1 review

By Andy Price



Given all the advances in recording technology, particularly in terms of digital modelling, it's interesting that not only is there a continued demand for new hardware that employs 'old' technology, but also a market for reissues of classic designs. Perhaps it's the very fact that digital simulations of vintage kit have become so good that many engineers aspire to owning and using the real analogue deal.

The Lisson Grove AR-1 is based on EMI's RS124 compressor, which, alongside the Fairchild 660, provided much of the dynamic control processing at Abbey Road Studios throughout the 1960s and beyond. The original RS124 was itself based around the American Altec 436B (see Studio Icons No15, January 2012), which EMI's technical engineers modified to create a compressor that met with their very high standards. This version of the design has been further modified by Lisson Grove, a US-based company formed by Grammy Award-winning engineer/producer Hugo Nicolson, intent on 'recapturing the finest studio sounds of yesteryear'.

A standard 2U 19-inch rackmount design, the AR-1 is an all-valve, single-channel, variable-mu compressor that sounds as authentically vintage as its wonderfully retro look suggests. The casing is made from thick steel topped with a scratch-proof coating, while the front panel is finished in sage green, reminding us of old EMI BTR2 tape recorders and British military equipment in equal measure. Two large, continuously variable chicken-head pots situated to the left of the Hoyt VU meter control input and output gain, while a similar-looking stepped switch to the right controls the compressor's release settings. Two smaller pots are provided for attack – continuously variable between 15ms and 125ms – and an O/P load control that alters the unit's output impedance between 200 Ohms and 600 Ohms. Original EMI models operated at 200 Ohms only, lending the unit a dark sound that might be considered a little too vintage for modern tastes; the higher impedance settings give a brighter tone and more open sound. A screwdriver-adjustable Balance control is also provided to allow the gain-reduction valve to be balanced. This is a very simple operation that enables the user to quickly check that the unit is performing up to standard. If the valve has drifted out of true, a ticking sound is heard, which can be eliminated by adjusting the Balance control.

Three valves are employed inside the AR-1 (6ES8, 6CG7 and 6AL5), while other internal components include high-quality Solen and Auricap capacitors and a Sowter input transformer; the output transformer is a bespoke unit from CineMag. No expense has been spared in creating this unit, and as befits a hand-built compressor, point-to-point wiring is used exclusively.

The rear panel features XLR input and output connectors, with 1/4 -inch jack connectors provided for stereo linking and a footswitch (not included) to allow hands-free operation of the Infinity control – an unusual feature that we shall now explain.

The original RS124 featured a Hold setting on its Release control, which has been renamed Infinity for this model. This function is, in effect, an extremely long release time that can be used to prime the unit before use or, at the end of a heavily compressed musical passage, be employed to halt recovery, preventing the compressor from releasing to reveal unwanted noise. The Release switch offers six release-time settings, with the Infinity option located between each setting so it is never more than one click away.



Beatle Bass

During its 1960s heyday, the RS124 was used extensively as a group compressor, particularly on rhythm-track recordings; however, it was also used to track individual instruments, notably contributing to Paul McCartney's legendary bass guitar sound.

With this in mind, we located a Rickenbacker 4001S bass – the same model that McCartney used on albums such as Rubber Soul, Revolver and Sgt. Pepper – and plugged it into our Fender Bassman amp, mic'ing the cabinet with an AKG C 414 B- ULS (see Studio Icons, page 114), a descendant of the C12 mic that was used in the 1960s. Setting the AR-1's impedance output to 200 Ohms and recording with fast/medium attack and release times, then further compressing the recording with a slower attack and longer release, we achieved a very convincing McCartney-esque tone: creamy-smooth and even, with plenty of presence.

We also used the AR-1 on some vocal tracks and acoustic guitar, experimenting with different O/P load settings to achieve the optimum tonal balance before resorting to EQ. We couldn't resist strapping the unit across a mono mix of drums, compressing quite heavily with a fast release time, and found that although the AR-1 provided a certain amount of energy and glue to the sound, we couldn't quite get the big, fat and punchy sounds that our rather more Fairchild -like Thermionic Culture Phoenix gives us.

This is a very even-handed compressor that goes about its business in an extremely musical way. Even at heavy settings with fast attack and release times we found that the AR-1 was disinclined to pump, which is great for creating fabulous dynamically controlled sounds without unpleasant thumping artefacts, but probably not the first choice for those seeking heavy, smashed compression effects that surge and swell; it's too refined for that. In this respect, the AR-1 reminded us of our Summit Audio TLA-100A, a single-channel unit that we often use for bass guitar, vocals and acoustic-instrument compression duties. In a direct comparison – both with a bass and vocal track – we found the AR-1 to behave in a similar way, with a tonal match comparable at a medium/high output impedance setting on the AR-1. At the highest 600 Ohm

setting, the review unit sounded a little more open, with superior air and space around vocals in particular, while the 200 Ohm level gave a rich, rounded and cohesive sound to bass guitar.

The AR-1 ranks as one of the very best single-channel valve compressors we've heard. It is easy to set up and gets on with its job in a fuss-free manner while offering excellent control for precision engineering. Add to that superb boutique-style build quality along with an impeccable pedigree and the result is a beautiful-sounding compressor that is rewarding to use. Start saving for one now!

Verdict

- + Authentic vintage sound
- + Intuitive to use+ Fine tone-sculpting feature
- + Useful Infinity release setting
- + Excellent build and finish
- Single-channel only
- Not for fans of 'pumping'

The Lisson Grove AR-1 is a world -class product that delivers high-end audio quality with style and composure. The price tag reflects the fact that it is destined to sit alongside the finest outboard gear available in top studios around the world.

9/10

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