



A-Designs Ventura

Sharing an approach and paying homage to a less well-known US mixer brand, this channel of mic preamp/DI with EQ offers lots to **JON THORNTON**

California based A-Designs isn't exactly a new kid on the block, it's been around for more than a decade and boasts more than 60 years cumulative experience in pro-audio design in its core team. Like many 'boutique' companies, the emphasis here is on high quality analogue outboard with a nod to 'classic' designs, but exploiting modern manufacturing methods to extract the best possible bang for the buck. What's different in A-Designs' case is that the key inspirations are based around a uniquely West Coast audio heritage.

Cast your mind back to the era of large format analogue consoles, and the chances are the usual (largely British) suspects spring first to mind. But on this side of the Atlantic we tend to forget that there was also a healthy domestic manufacturing base in the US. Some, like MCI, Harrison and API, became internationally renowned. But there were many others, including Quad Eight Electronics from California, who enjoyed significant success in the 1970s but are possibly not as well-known now.

Previously known by the much less snappier moniker of the JM-3001, A-Designs' Ventura mic pre and EQ (UK£1469 + VAT) takes its name from the Quad Eight Ventura console. There's more than simply a homage here though, as the internal design philosophy gives more than a nod in the same direction. The heart of the microphone preamp is a discrete transistor based op-amp, bookended by Cinemag transformers on input and output (slightly ironic given that one of Quad Eight's early employees was Deane Jensen of Jensen Transformers fame). The Ventura looks much better in the flesh than in pictures — the cream front panel is plenty

thick and mated to a steel chassis, and the rotary controls are beautiful anodised aluminium affairs, with a nice positive feel to them.

The mic preamp offers 72dB of gain via a continuously variable pot, and the usual options are provided for phantom power, polarity reverse and a -20dB pad, all on sub-miniature toggle switches. In addition to the mic preamp, an unbalanced high impedance input is also provided on the front panel on a ¼-inch jack. This has its own dedicated op-amp and associated Gain control, and unlike some designs needs to be selected via a toggle switch rather than by simply plugging a source in. When not driven hard, the preamp is best described as 'workmanlike' and that's not intended to be a negative comment. It's detailed and reasonably transparent sounding, but definitely isn't trying to be 'straight-wire with gain'. Instead, it knocks just enough of the hard edges off to inject a touch of character, but without any obvious harmonic distortion or muddiness. Driven harder, and this characteristic becomes more obvious particularly in the mid-range — a great pairing with a Royer 122 on a guitar cab, for instance.

The EQ section is a three-band parametric design. Dual concentric, switched controls set centre frequency and cut or boost in steps (+/-2, 4, 6, 9, 12dB). Each band has three options for Q selected with a three-position toggle switch. These are marked S (Sharp), W (Wide) and N (Narrow), with corresponding Q values of 2.4, 0.7 and 7.7 respectively. There's a sensible degree of overlap between each of the bands, and the centre frequencies chosen should suit most requirements. In addition, the low and high bands can be switched to

operate as shelving filters. A high and low pass filter (150Hz and 9kHz) can also be switched in — in signal path terms these are post-EQ just before the output. The manual gives their response as second order (12dB octave) but they don't sound anywhere near as steep as that to me and seem better suited to gentle tonal shaping rather than problem solving.

EQ designs and implementations are always a matter of taste to some degree although they invariably get categorised somewhere on the spectrum between 'surgical' and 'musical'. The Ventura's EQ throws that into a cocked hat as it's that rare beast that seems equally proficient at both. It's hard to make things sound really overcooked with gentle shaping but with judicious choice of the Q setting (Sharp seemed to work better than Narrow in most cases), you really can dig into a sound and sort out resonance issues that more 'musical' designs would struggle with.

The preamp output, whether microphone or DI, can be picked up directly from a transformer balanced output on the rear, pre-EQ. By default the signal then passes through the EQ and filters, before hitting another transformer balanced output. This arrangement has some flexibility though, thanks to a ¼-inch TRS socket on the rear panel. At first glance, this suggests a typical (unbalanced) insert point in the signal path but it's actually a line level balanced input to the EQ section. Plugging a source in here breaks the default signal path of preamp to EQ, although the direct preamp output is still of course available on the rear panel. Thus the preamp and EQ can work independently on two different sources — or, of course, you could use this input in conjunction with the direct output as an insert point in the traditional sense.

All of which adds up to the fact that the Ventura ended up taking me slightly by surprise — which goes to show that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. With all of the talk of heritage and classic inspiration, it would be easy to view this as another 'me-too' boutique box in a crowded market. In reality though, it's an extremely well made, well thought out and very versatile tool in a modern context. Think of it as 'modern informed by classic approaches', rather than modern trying to emulate a classic, and you're in the right ball-park. ■

PROS Well built, flexible channel strip; lovely sounding and very useful EQ; transformers on every output.

CONS No on-board metering; may not be 'vintage sounding' enough for some.

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