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**A-Designs Pacifica \$1995****pros**

Superb sound.  
 Excellent build quality.

**cons**

Nostalgic marketing guff — but don't let that put you off!

**summary**

This is a high-quality preamp that offers a sound somewhere between the transparent and the characterful, and is arguably more versatile than many of its competitors.

**information**

\$1995.  
 A-Designs +1 818 716 4153.  
[Click here to email](#)  
[www.adesignsaudio.com](http://www.adesignsaudio.com)

## A-Designs Pacifica

### Two-channel Microphone Preamplifier

Reviews : Preamp

Published in SOS September 2009

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**Striking a useful balance between the transparent and the characterful, this high-quality, US-made preamp design brings versatility to the studio and some colour to the rack...**

**Eric James**

Shortly after being invited to review the A-Designs Pacifica mic preamp, I stumbled across an interesting thread on a well-known discussion forum. A young recording engineer claimed that, having read up about the test measurements of microphone preamps, some serious comparative listening to the sound of a range of preamps led him to the conclusion that (I paraphrase) because all of the preamps' operational statistics were very similar, there were no serious differences between them. Further more, he saw this as evidence that the preamp market was all a boutique-manufacturer-led sonic con. Despite the initial reactive posts ("you obnoxious troll!" and so on), there followed a more informed discussion, in which it was generally accepted that measurements don't tell the whole story, that there's a wider, demonstrable sonic difference between different preamps, and that, in all likelihood, the original poster must have been conducting the test with sub-standard equipment.

The one thing the young engineer did right was to conduct a subjective test, but it's certainly true that sub-standard equipment will skew your results. You can't assess a decent mic pre without a decent mic and A-D converter.

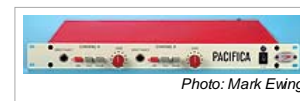


Photo: Mark Ewing

### Heritage?

I mention all this because the marketing literature for the Pacifica might be enough to drive you to this sort of conclusion. My first impression of the Pacifica's user manual was that it was obviously (though sadly not clearly) written by A-Designs' marketing department. Its seven brief pages comprise a full-page legal notice, two pictures, a very short page of contents, a short page of (unqualified by test parameters) specifications, and another short page of features (which include not only 'a Red LED Phantom Indicator' but also a 'Blue LED Power Indicator').

A whole page is devoted to impressing upon the reader that the Pacifica is a sleeping giant of a mic preamp, which actually has a rock & roll heritage as long as your arm — and which stretches back just as far as those of more familiar names such as Neve and API. I can't claim to be qualified to judge the assertion that the A-Designs consoles were right up there with the big boys in high-end studios in the '70s: I've never seen or heard a Quad Eight Ventura, but then my recording career started in the mid '80s. But I am slightly confused by the fact that over half of their examples from the 'heyday of American professional music recording' are actually English (the Beatles, the Who, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin). So perhaps we'd better just take their word for it (or not) on those historical facts, and assess the company's Pacifica preamp as it presents itself today on its own terms. Thankfully, it can easily stand alone as an excellent, modern mic preamp, without whatever ghost-written biography the manufacturer's marketeers provide...

### Overview

The Pacifica is a 1U, rackmounting, dual-mono preamp — 'mono/mono', as the manual helpfully explains — with an additional front-panel quarter-inch active input. It is transformer loaded (both input and output), boasts an impressive 72dB of gain, and is quoted as offering a generously wide frequency response of 9Hz to 101kHz. In the way in which such things can sometimes be, this is a good-looking piece of kit, with a nicely understated creamy-white facing and a red body (that's actually less garish in the flesh than on the manufacturer's web-site), which apparently aids its possession of a "unique 'Made in California' feel", whatever that might mean.

Each channel sports a large, red gain control knob, the direct inject (DI) input, and push-buttons for phantom power, a 20dB pad, and a phase invert switch. The back panel has Neutrik input and output connectors, all very solidly connected to the chassis. The build quality is very good.

### A Little Je Ne Sais Quoi

Bearing in mind what I said earlier, I decided that in reviewing the A-Designs Pacifica I would conduct some good old-fashioned, unscientific subjective listening tests, comparing the Pacifica with other mic preamps that I use regularly, including models by Grace, SADiE, and Broadhurst Gardens. I employed a restricted range of mics (Royer, Sonodore, Schoeps) and high-quality, and famously colourless D-A converters, such as dCS — and I certainly did hear a difference.

I used the Pacifica on a number of URM Audio sessions, with music ranging from live concert jazz to studio folk and blues, but I decided in advance that all of my experiments on classical sources would have to be strictly off the clock. Subsequent test sessions confirmed the suspicions behind that decision: the Pacifica is not a purveyor of entirely unvarnished truth. But it's none the worse — and in fact sometimes very much better — for that, as it is increasingly rare these days for the unvarnished truth to be the object of the recording exercise anyway.

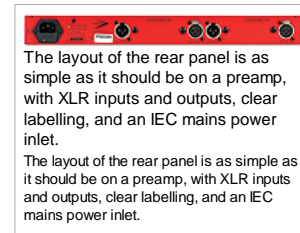
Take, for example, my problem of the saxophonist with the bad breath — not his own, but rather the obstructive-to-recording side-effects of his deliberate technique of letting the centre of the note die early, then allowing just the breath, which would normally have sustained the tone, to carry on through the instrument alone. From the audience perspective it sounded quite sublime; but through our standard location rig (SADiE LRX2) and the control-room monitoring, it sounded like we were trying to record on a rough day in Snowdonia. Having tried a number of mic combinations during rehearsals (all stereo — I mic everything in stereo these days), I sadly rejected the use of my Royer SF12 (a firm favourite for sax) on grounds of sheer fear for its survival in high winds. The best result was from a pair of Schoeps MK21s in a sort-of wide ORTF configuration placed just above the musician's waist height, but well away from him, and then angled up towards him (a technique I use when recording live classical vocals, if the mics must be positioned so that the singer doesn't have to look at them). This diminished the wind noise to a sibilant breathiness, which was still problematic but which I assumed I'd be able to reduce further at the mixing stage with a de-esser.

But during a break in rehearsal I took an opportunity to plumb in the Pacifica for mic-pre duty with the Schoeps — and after the next number everyone agreed that the result was instantly better, although quite why it was better was not immediately clear. The high breathiness of the sax didn't hit the listener half so hard, but as the Pacifica had certainly not simply rolled off a whole lot of top (the breath noise anyway varied from around 4-7k) it wasn't simply a matter of some subtraction from the original signal. Instead, the preamp seemed to be doing more with the lower mid-range, and in the 'Yin-Yang' way that messing with any frequency range will affect another, this made the breathiness less obtrusive. It would seem that the Pacifica harmonically thickens the sound (although I'd hesitate to call it 'warming') in a way that doesn't actually diminish detail, but which doesn't call so much attention to it either. And, importantly, the sax player loved the result.

### Thickening

Another occasion on which I noticed a similar positive effect was when I was using the Royer for recording some rather wispy and winsome female backing vocals in a circle. A goodly proportion of the Pacifica's 72dB of relatively quiet gain came in handy here, whereas the original choice of preamp (a Grace, which is normally so good for female voice detail) provided results that were just too wispy. The Pacifica provided a morsel more meatiness, which gave the backing vocals the body they needed to fill in and around the main voice.

### Electric Guitar



The layout of the rear panel is as simple as it should be on a preamp, with XLR inputs and outputs, clear labelling, and an IEC mains power inlet.

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My favourite use of the Pacifica, though, was when a long-retired session guitarist (me) was persuaded to come out to play one day ("oh go on, please let me have a go") to lay down some classic blues lines — basically repetitive, simplistic and slow — on a folk-blues song for a CD he was supposed to be producing. Waving away the fussy footpedals of his fellow guitarists, he simply dusted off his PRS Custom guitar and plugged it into his Mesa Dual Rectifier Maverick amp, miked it up through the Pacifica pre, ran through his very best bendy-string blues riff... and thought he'd died and gone to heaven. I say this quite seriously: the Pacifica went immediately to the top of my list for recording electric guitar, not on the grounds that if it can make me sound good it must be brilliant, but on the grounds that what it delivered to tape was just what the PRS/Mesa should sound like, and does sound like live, but in my experience rarely does so on record. Classical clean preamps are too clinical for such work, whereas many tube preamps — especially those that ape ancient circuits — make for two tubes too many (the Dual Rectifier in valve mode has plenty of its own); and my experience with the revered Neve-designed preamps is that they add grit to the sound, which isn't always what's needed. The Pacifica captured a balance of body and bite that sounded just lovely.

In the general course of events I don't get much call for direct injections in recording, so I'm not really in a position to judge the Pacifica against its competitors on that score, but I did use it just twice in this way and was very impressed both times. An Ibanez SD bass sounded very articulate, and blended well with the sound of the miked amp; and an Ovation Balladeer was full-bodied, sounding very nice for jazz.

### What's Not To Like?

There are always different horses for different courses, and the Pacifica didn't suit the requirements of some of my other work. Although superb on relatively close-miked jazz piano, it lost some of the loveliness of a classical Steinway, which the LRX preamps captured in full. While it was great on drums in general, it didn't produce the startling results on high-toned and tuned percussion (wind-chimes, marimba, shakers) that the Grace can. And — this to my great surprise — some female vocalists, especially those singing with acoustic accompaniment, simply didn't like what it did to their voices. Of course, we're only talking about subtle differences here, and it could be that if they'd not been offered a choice the vocalists would all have been happy enough, but on a number of occasions when they were offered a choice, they chose the other preamp over the Pacifica.

Most of these results are unsurprising, because putting transformers in the signal path will do things to the sound (the harmonic thickening) which complement some instruments and timbral requirements, but are less effective for others. What was nice about the Pacifica was that when this effect was required, it seemed to leave the high frequencies pretty much alone — which makes it much more widely usable than an across-the-board 'warm' pre-amp.

### Verdict

I like the Pacifica a lot. Within a very wide area of recording needs, it adds a complementary enhancement that is not easy to describe but so often sounds 'just right.' You don't need to buy into any Californian nostalgia trip to recognise the quality of this preamp, or to understand its appeal. **SOS**

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**Registered office: Media House, Trafalgar Way, Bar Hill, Cambridge, CB23 8SQ, United Kingdom.**  
Email: [Contact SOS](mailto:Contact SOS) | Telephone: +44 (0)1954 789888 | Fax: +44 (0)1954 789895

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