



Thermionic Culture Little Red Bustard

Thermionic's collection of outstanding units is characterised by regular revists, rethinks and new releases. Bird fancier **GEORGE SHILLING** sums it all up.

Thermionic Culture's enormous Fat Bustard summer aims to add value to its analogue valve-based summing with enhancements and features like 'varislope' EQ curves, stereo spreader, Spread Filter and Bass to Centre. But with the idea of making a more affordable summer, or as a bolt-on for extra channels on the original, the Little Bustard was born. It was a much simpler device, without the enhancing features of the Fat Bustard. Designer Vic Keary has now launched the completely redesigned Little Red Bustard with entirely new circuitry, its innards more akin to the Fat Bustard. It introduces 'Air' and 'Attitude' controls, and does away with the unnecessary level and pan controls on the original.

The Little Red Bustard (UKE1750 + VAT) is housed in a conventional fairly deep 2U rack unit and provides 16 mono inputs grouped as stereo pairs. All audio connections are XLR sockets; these are proper latching Neutrik ones. The inputs are rather oddly arranged in two rows from right to left, with 1 and 2 above 3 and 4, then 5 and 6 above 7 and 8, and so on. But this pretty much mirrors the not-so-odd layout of a set of red sleeved on-off toggles on the front panel for each stereo pair. These are handy for muting mix elements easily once you've got your routing sorted. The final pair of toggles (for channels 13/14 and 15/16) are accompanied



be useful in moderation to spice things up, and I liked the richness it added.

Two knurled and indented knobs allow tweaking of the output gain separately for each channel with a range from -14 to +1.5dB with 1/5dB clicks around zero for recallable settings. These are mainly useful for compensating when boosting with the Attitude circuit, which can add up to about 12dB of gain into the mix path. There is rarely the need for separate left and right control but Keary decided that the mono pots were better than the stereo, and the indents could be better felt with these.

The output circuit employs NOS American Sylvania 6189 or new JJ ECC 802S valves which have a bigger plate than standard ECC82s for what Keary describes as a 'ballsier' output — bigger and warmer. Indeed the maximum output is slightly higher than the Fat Bustard (which instead uses massive 6SN7s which are slightly noisier and get rather hot). US-made GE 5965 valves are used for inputs, these too with a large plate. I found some microphony when tapping the unit if it was less than fully warmed up, but this disappeared after a while. Keary rejects 30% of these valves when selecting them.

The aforementioned LED 'eyes' usefully light up in different colours depending on the output levels. The yellow ones show signal present, then at 0 to +10dBu the larger ones glow green, then turn red beyond that.

One thing that sets the Thermionic summing mixers apart from most competitors is that Vic has avoided using balancing transformers or dual output circuitry and employed unbalanced connections. This lends a certain sonic character to the unit, and no doubt keeps costs down. To avoid problems when interfacing with the balanced outputs found on most audio interfaces, the LRB's inputs are wired with a small resistor on the cold side. When connecting to

transformer balanced outputs, there is unity gain, but with the electronically balanced outputs of my converters there is a drop of about 5dB. This 'semi-floating' system is also used in the standard Culture Vulture. In practice the level drop was not a major problem and not detrimental to the sound quality, although you might need to crank your feeds if you want to get really crunching with the Attitude knob.

The first thing to notice is that at normal levels the LRB is utterly clean, quiet and distortion-free, with a huge frequency response. Fed from and going back into Universal Audio Apollos, things sound open, big and wide compared with being in-the-box. Adding a dose of Attitude and a little bit of Air really helps the mix jump out of the speakers and lends things a bit of vitality. Attitude brings richness to all frequencies, and (depending on your levels) even Max is not totally unusable. Glue is the term that inevitably comes to mind here. Or perhaps something akin to the magic you can get with good vinyl records. Air is, well, airy and does a very good impression of removing a blanket from your tweeters. Attitude can sometimes dull things ever so slightly and Air is the perfect way to restore a little bit of space to the highs, without the obvious 10kHz boost of most EQs. It's so smooth that full-on (11) is never unpleasant, but usually a setting of 4 or 5 just brings a nice clarity and sheen.

When choosing a summing mixer you must decide what kind of colouration is desired. Some transistor boxes aim to be completely colourless, clean and neutral and get very close to achieving that. These types of summer may reveal flaws in your converters, and you might well then decide you prefer to mix in-the box! Many mix engineers claim that some sort of enhancement is inherent in analogue summing. But the Little Red Bustard undoubtedly brings something

by extra yellow sleeved toggles which provide the option to centre those channels (instead of spreading in stereo as per the others).

The front panel design is dominated by a graphic of a pair of bird's eyes and a beak. You might not initially notice that the eyes are bejewelled with LEDs as they only light up with signal. There is the usual large toggle and green lamp for power, and the rear panel includes an IEC socket with fuse holder and adjacent voltage selector. Build quality is solid, with venting in the sides and top which are fabricated from one piece of steel finished in textured black paint.

The Air control is a white chicken-head knob calibrated from 1 to 11 (of course!) This introduces a gentle high frequency lift across the mix from about 7kHz, peaking at 30kHz. It adds a lovely sheen, and is very gentle and seems like it is only boosting by a few dBs even at full tilt, but is a very welcome method of adding, well, air to your mix.

Below this is a switched red knob labelled Attitude. Familiar to users of other Thermionic devices such as the Rooster, this introduces a little bit of a crunchy gain boost to proceedings with positions from 1 to 5 and then Max. This adds up to about 5% 2nd harmonic distortion and in practice this seems a rather smoother distortion than that on the Rooster, and is certainly more appropriate in mix scenarios. For more aggressive material in particular this can bring extra life to the music. But for smoother tracks, this can also

extra to the party that cannot be achieved within the DAW. It can supply a whole cauldron of magic, whether you like things clean and crisp, or with a bit more wickedness. ■

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| PROS | Big warm summing; juicy Attitude and pleasant Air HF boost options. |
| CONS | No 'instant bypass' of Attitude and Air enhancements for comparison. |
| EXTRAS | The Swift is an all-valve 2-channel stereo EQ, with frequencies chosen in conjunction |



with noted international producers and engineers. It includes shelving bass and treble lift/cut controls at two frequencies each, Mid Cut and Lift at four frequencies each with three 'Q' combinations plus Thermionic's Presence and Air controls. A Switchable High Pass Filter with a special last position is used in conjunction with the Bass lift and can yield an interesting combination. Gain is adjustable in 0.75dB steps. The Swift is handmade in England using the same chassis as the Classic Phoenix and the same valves as the Little Red Bustard.

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