

Thermionic CULTURE VULTURE Review Reviewed by Jurgen Cremonese for Monitor

Monitor is a serious magazine that carries out reliable tests. We are now covering something completely different. Flying in the face of all the formal jargon this is one of the funniest products on the current market: Culture Vulture. It is just a plaything, because who really needs distortion equipment for twelve thousand kronor plus VAT?

This is a totally touchy-feely product, which I have been waiting subconsciously for all these years; two rack units high, covered in knobs and switches and a pair of overbearing Monacor VU-gauges. What on earth is it? I am none the wiser when I first look in the manual. The warning panel, which normally tells you about high voltage risks, begins instead: “Warning! Do not take this unit seriously! Culture Vulture is a ‘fun’ unit...” - a warning which I had never read before. Continued reading of the manual, which is something of a must, shows how the kit works.



Functions

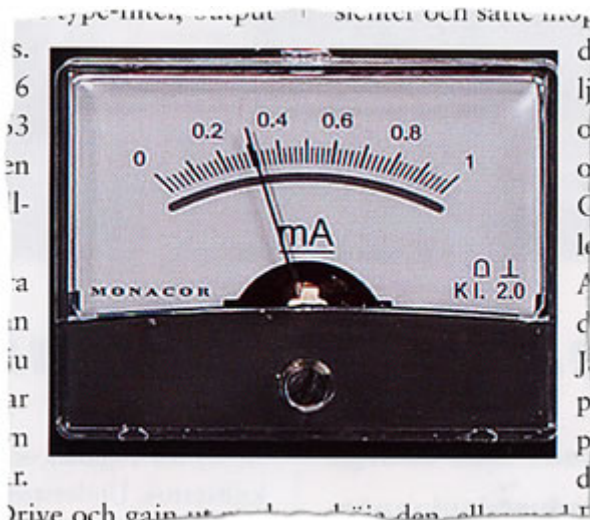
As I said, Culture Vulture is completely packed with controls: two channels with controls for drive, bias, distortion type-filter, output level and switches for overdrive and thru. At the heart of the Culture Vulture there is an EF86 for the input of each channel, a 6A56 for distortion and a 5963 for the output. Crazy valves again, but you can use a 12AU7 in the output, which is conveniently situated.

There are three types of distortion to work with: T, P1 and P2. T sets a harmonic, even distortion, P1 a stronger one, which produces the harsher side of the Culture Vulture workings, and P2 adds an octave to the original sound, but not clean, as the manual so rightly points out.

You increase the gain in with Drive and the gain out with Output. It is strange that Culture Vulture only has an unbalanced in/out, with high/low out. On the plus side, there are HI-Z-inputs for DI use. The bias knob sort of alters the source of the sound the more you turn it. It is like an extra knob to control the type and extent of the distortion. It's like going from the sublime to the ridiculous. Finally, the filter is a low rate at 7 kHz, 4 kHz and Off.

Performance

Are you any the wiser? I sat down and connected up a wind sound, which was giving me some trouble. It was sounding too clean and tight and I thought that it could do with a bit more oomph.



At the T- position with Bias at zero, Culture Vulture works like an exciter and tape compression simulator. There is more attack and a fatter sound when you add more Drive and compensation to the Output, exactly like when a tape has reached its capacity. But when I turned up the Bias, things started to happen. Certain frequencies started to become more prominent to the point that I was completely distorting the whole sound source to something which resembled a faulty loud speaker.

The P1 position is very noisy and reminds me very much of the distortion in a guitar amplifier. If the sound source is dynamic, Culture Vulture brings out some of the frequencies and fluctuations and makes the sound source become alive and more natural. At the high Bias setting it screams at all frequencies and it sounds as if my wind section is right inside my ear and playing fortissimo!

The P-2 position is completely mental! The added octave moves up with the Bias control and a high distortion makes my wind section sound as if it has gone mad, or as if it is playing on drugs from the other side of the River Styx.

Is there really any use for the Culture Vulture? I can say that my neat wind section (extremely competent middle-aged men with a family and steady income) sound in the final mix as if they are a pair of half-cut young rascals singing “ I’m Walking to New Orleans” with Fats Domino at some smoky joint in 1959! Do you understand now? It was incredible how Culture Vulture completely changed the feel of the whole sound. I set it at T-position with Drive turned up and adjusted Bias afterwards. From not having fitted in at all, the wind sound determined where the whole thing was going. The drums could be thrown in and augmented in the mix, the guitars could be made louder and the whole vocal performance worked out well.

I used Culture Vulture mainly in the mobile studio, putting existing sounds straight through it, listening until the distortion regenerated everything (but letting the tonality remain) saving some fluctuations and putting it all together graphically again without Delay [effect]. It works really well, very quickly and creates a depth in the sound picture, which sounds full of quality. All software synths and the piano can be improved in the same way. Bases and drums work extremely well with a run through Culture Vulture; the only problem is that you quickly run out of channels.

Using Culture Vulture on songs works miracles, although strangely enough not with the very latest music. Personally I think that it worked fantastically well with very dynamic music, jazz, calm slow pop, and above all David Sylvian-type music, where I could strengthen the song radically without making it louder, or adjust it with EQ.

Summary

To sum up, I can say that it was unbelievably good fun! Culture Vulture is not for those who are looking for a clean signal – West Coast sensibilities would hate it. But it works with everything, and 12,000 kr + VAT seems cheap for the sonic processing you’re getting. Moreover, you will find yourself in good company, although not of the sort than you would have expected. Thermionic Culture hired out a machine for the latest Bond film; I can only speculate on what that was used for.

I have had fun, almost to the point of hysteria, and I think personally that Culture Vulture is creative and useful for augmenting the sound in order to get something new, different and better.