

FOCUSRITE LIQUID MIX

With 32 channels of convolution-based 'classic' EQ and compression, Focusrite is making waves with Liquid Mix.

Text: David Helping



► A couple of years ago Focusrite dropped an impressive piece of equipment in our laps with The Liquid Channel. Liquid Channel set tongues wagging with its emulations of classic mic pres and compressors. After a polite pause, long enough for Liquid Channel owners to have time to feel smug about their purchase, we now have the rather special Liquid Mix – 32 channels of classic compression and EQ fuelled by its own DSP and control surface. Using the same Dynamic Convolution process as the Liquid Channel, Liquid Mix boasts 'any Compressor and EQ in history'... 32 of them, in fact, ready to jump right into any major DAW platform! Retailing at only \$1799, there must be something I'm missing? I would easily expect a product that claims to do what the Liquid Mix does to cost three times as much...

INTO THE LIQUID

I immediately put Liquid Mix to work on a Quad 2.5GHz Apple G5 running MOTU Digital Performer 5.01. The Mac OSX Version is now shipping worldwide but the PC crowd will have to wait – but not for long. I was amazed at how easily this thing integrates. I opened the box, attached the Firewire cable to my G5, installed the software and restarted... that's it. I'm talking five minutes from the FedEx guy's hands to working in my native DAW! No registration, no complex setup, and no power supply (the unit ships with one but works perfectly from the Firewire bus power alone). The Liquid Mix control surface is robust and well made. All of the detented knobs feel good in your hand, and I like the dedicated rear-lit button to bypass the compressor, EQ and entire channel. At a single glance you know exactly what is going on with your selected channel. I opened a large session and pulled down my list of inserts on the main vocal. There I see 'Liquid Mix' and up comes an instance of the plug-in and the Liquid Mix Manager, a simple application for changing the core hardware settings. In the Liquid Mix Manager you can select the sample rate (which must be the same as your current session) and the maximum number of mono instances. As expected, the higher your sample rate, the less instances you can instantiate. At 44.1k you get your 32 mono channels and, of course, a stereo instance counts as two of them. Running at HD sample rates (88.2 and 96) substantially decreases the number of channels available in your session but luckily every Liquid Mix has an expansion slot for an optional additional processing card (currently there's no info about this).

The plug in window itself has a very similar layout to the

hardware unit – all the hardware knobs and switches are logically laid out. At the top left is a field to type in the name of the track – this is important for those wanting to use the hardware interface for tweaking. After naming the track it's instantly displayed in the LCD of the controller and pressing the Track Select button allows you to quickly scroll through each active instance in your mix by name. Choosing your compressor and EQ emulation model is equally simple on the hardware unit as it is in the plug-in, but I did most of my work with the mouse – it's how I'm used to working. In the pull-down menu for the compressor I see all of the currently available models (the final list of 40 compressor and 20 EQ emulations can be viewed online at www.focusrite.com/liquidmixdownloads). As with all emulative devices, each modelled classic has a 'non-copyright infringing' clever name – such as 'Trany' for API models and 'Silver' for Avalon etc – so best to have the translations printed out as you become familiar with the terminology.

LIQUID AIR

I went straight for the Neve and Fairchild compressors for my female vocalist and was instantly impressed with the tone/colour change and classic character customary in those models. I wasn't quite as blown away with the way a few of the compressor models behaved – this took a bit of tweaking to get a 'feel' for. Speaking of feel, one of the many cool aspects of the control surface is the bright and tall LED level meters, including a dedicated gain reduction meter, which I loved – after using plug-ins for so long it was exciting to glance down and see physical meters for the channel I was on. I gave the compressors some real stick to see how far I could push things before they sounded like digital trash. I'm happy to report that most of them held their analogue quality with dignity and grace. And to reiterate, the compressors sound very good... And I constantly reminded myself that 32 channels of decent compression would tax my Mac's CPU a great deal and that this unit is simply amazing for the price. The sheer number of vintage models available would surely cost 10 times the price of the Liquid Mix if offered as native plug-ins.

As I selected and changed settings on different tracks in Digital Performer, I tried several times to grab the knobs on the hardware unit only to realise that it was controlling a different channel. It started to become very clear that if you want to use the control surface in a busy mixing session, you may want to learn to use only the unit itself

and get speedy with it. It will take some time to get used to hitting the channel select button on the unit and turning the knob before attempting to edit the channel your working within your DAW. [Alternatively, it might make sense for the hardware control to graphically reflect which channel you're tweaking in the DAW – Ed.]

The quality and character of the EQ emulations were even more impressive than the compressors. I could get just about any sound I could imagine and every model was truly musical. However, I found the control surface letting me down. The EQ boost/cut resolution was, at best, 0.7dB. So the smooth and precise adjustments I was making with the mouse, on screen, simply wasn't possible on the controller. In a world of the mouse and keyboard I'm right into the idea of the Liquid Mix Control Surface but when it comes to detailed work, this shortcoming puts the unit far below the quality of the models. (Obviously, when the Liquid mix is emulating EQ models that originally had/have detented knobs at fixed settings – such as those from API and many others – this is not an issue.) I'd imagine this resolution problem is only a software upgrade away from being sorted, and a minor issue compared to the joy of pulling an amazing and instantly 'classic' vocal sound – bravo Focusrite! And, finally, no mention of the EQ section would be complete without mention of Liquid Mix's 'Hybrid Super EQ Creation', where a unique seven-band super EQ can be created, constructed from separate classic EQ sections of your choosing!

As one would expect, Liquid Mix has the ability to save and load settings. This means that a favourite combination and tone can be recalled at any point and used on another track. Saving and loading can be done from the hardware or software but naming and deciding where to store them has some definite rules to follow to ensure things work properly.

Currently supported plug-in formats are AU, VST and RTAS (RTAS-wrapped VST). There is a minimum version requirement for Logic (7.1 but 7.2 is highly recommended) and Pro Tools 7.x.

LIQUID COOL?

Whether in audio post, pro recording facilities or the project studio, mixing 'in the box' has just gained a mighty set of wonderful-sounding high-end 'vintage' tools. Having such a wealth of classy compressors and EQs at your fingertips is a tantalising prospect and the ability to employ up to 32 is a luxury that your CPU alone could never afford. The fact is that the Liquid Mix emulations (from convolution specialists, Sintafex) have been under construction for over two years, with some requiring more than 8000 separate sampling sequences to ensure the model sounded like the genuine article. The amount of work that has gone into this product is impressive to say the least. Focusrite reportedly has additional emulations already well advanced, as well as presets to be made available online for those desiring to quickly get the most out of their Liquid Mix. As I say, it's a tantalising prospect. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$1799

Contact
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Pros
Great compression and EQ emulations.
Well priced.
Very easy to install.
Bus powered.

Cons
Resolution of certain EQ gain adjustments too coarse on the controller.

Summary
32 channels of highly desirable compression and EQ is very hard to go past, especially at this price.

