

# TAPE OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

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*w/ Camper Van Beethoven*

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Issue No. 101

May/June 2014



## Serpent Audio

*Chimera 500-series opto compressor*

*Send N' Blend 500-series wet/dry bus*

Serpent Audio's *Chimera* is the first LA-3A clone to fit in a 500-series module, complete with that opto-circuit compression that so famously soothes vocal dynamics or unruly bass lines, or... well, works well in pretty much any other scenario you can think of. Fitting the LA-3A-style guts into a single 500-series module was thought impossible, but Serpent Audio has made zero compromises in this reproduction, which is a big deal. There are some added perks as well, like a high-frequency boost on the detector for de-essing and a hard-bypass switch. There are no blinding blue LEDs — just a warm and glowing VU meter, foreshadowing the way your audio's about to sound. Okay, seriously though, this thing does sound great — but there's more.

Serpent Audio was kind enough to also send me a pair of their *Send N' Blend* module, a 500-series wet/dry knob that allows you to use your analog gear in parallel, rather than setting up additional tracks in your DAW. That's right — ever wondered what your favorite boutique compressor would sound like in parallel with the uncompressed signal, but can't get the delay compensation to match up in your DAW? Or do you need a simple and effective way to mix together two signals into one track? We've all seen wet/dry knobs on digital reverbs and plug-in compressors for years, and every so often, a hardware unit with a blend knob pops up, but with the *Send N' Blend*, you can play the wet/dry game with any piece of gear that your heart so chooses. (It is helpful, but not required, to have a Radial Engineering Workhorse [Tape Op #85, #92] or a Purple Audio Sweet Ten [#100] rack, both of which provide rear-panel access for the wet signal, eliminating the need to use the front-panel TRS connector on the *Send N' Blend*.) For the purposes of this review, I figured the logical thing to do would be to pair the *Send N' Blend* with the *Chimera* for some parallel LA-3A-style compression.

You may be expecting some sort of detailed analysis of what happened, but the results were exactly as you'd expect them to be. Regardless of what I fed into the *Chimera*, including my buses and master bus, it was such a great feeling to be a little too heavy-handed and then dial in some dry signal to balance out the signal. My drums hit harder, my bass was thicker, my guitars were richer — you name it. I felt like the most useful combinations were achieved when I either went slightly overboard with gain reduction and then brought myself back with the *Send N' Blend*, or when I was compressing at  $-20$  dB or so reduction, but only using say, 20% of the wet signal.

Perhaps the most relevant example would be using the *Chimera* on vocals for that really soupy, heavy style of compression. Obviously, a sudden peak here or there would normally throw things off quite a bit, sucking your signal down  $-15$  dB when you'd been otherwise sitting at  $-5$  dB. Instead of reaching for an 1176, dialing in some dry signal is now an option, and you can keep the opto-glory that is near and dear to our ears.

Unless you have a shrink ray, you'll be hard pressed to find a better LA-3A option that fits into a 500-series rack, especially one with components such as those used by Serpent Audio. And the *Send N' Blend* is a no-brainer; this little device can add a new dimension to the tools you already know and love. (*Chimera* \$1079 street; *Send N' Blend* \$399; [www.serpentaudio.com](http://www.serpentaudio.com))

—Dave Hidek <dave@treelady.com>

## Ashman Acoustics

*SOM50 SuperOmni condenser mic*

In a world of modern mics which are all beginning to look and sound alike, the *SOM50* mic stands out from the pack both visually and sonically. Ashman Acoustics, a Seattle based company, is headed by Matt Ashman, a veteran of AEA mics. Matt approached the design of the *SOM50* in a way that is unique among modern mics, but hails back to the design of the revered Neumann M 50. For classical recordings, the M 50 reigns king, especially when used in a Decca tree arrangement. The original M 50, while at first glance looking like a typical vintage large-diaphragm tube mic, presents a unique internal design. The capsule is, in fact, a small-diaphragm one, mounted flush on the face of a 4 cm Perspex (acrylic) sphere. The acoustic principle of mounting a capsule on the face of sphere results in a mic with a basically flat response up to around 5 kHz, and then a gentle rise in frequency response that peaks with almost a 5 dB boost around 15 kHz. For classical recording, this high-frequency boost basically counteracts the loss of high-frequency energy in air, as mics are typically placed tens of feet away from the ensemble. In its modern form, the Ashman Acoustics *SOM50*, milled out of a solid piece of aircraft aluminum, looks like a 5" long small-diaphragm mic with a bulbous, 4 cm diameter spherical head. At the tip of its head lives a small-diaphragm (6 mm) omnidirectional electret condenser capsule.

The polar pattern of the *SOM50* is described as SuperOmni by Ashman, which basically means that below about 2 kHz, it's omni, while above 2 kHz, the pattern increasingly narrows towards cardioid. SuperOmni describes a mic that picks up a very natural room sound while still delivering a clearly localized image, especially when used in a stereo or multi-mic setup. Furthermore, the mic exhibits very little proximity effect, so the bass response stays balanced even when close mic'ing a source. The *SOM50* comes packaged as a pair of mics in a small plastic case, with a clip for each mic.

Even though these mics beg to be used in a live ensemble recording setup, my first use for the *SOM50s* involved recording acoustic guitar for a folksy R&B song. After setting up the mics a few feet behind my seat in the control room and getting levels over headphones, I was shocked at how natural the artist's voice sounded in my headphones when he spoke. I nearly jumped out of my seat because it felt like he came up and spoke right into my ear. Recording guitar on the back couch of my control room yields a dry, but comfortable ambience that I particularly like on acoustic guitar for pop records. The *SOM50* reproduced a bit more room ambience than I am used to, but the ambience blended well with the direct sound, and I felt it worked nicely in the track. At the same time, I was demoing a pair of Earthworks QTC40 mics, which are also small-diaphragm omni mics, so I put up one QTC40 and one *SOM50*, both about a foot in front of the guitar aimed at where the neck met the body. Using two Earthworks ZDT preamps [Tape Op #99], I found the two mics to sound so similar that I had to make sure I was monitoring both mics correctly. Ultimately, I used one track of each mic and blended them together. The interesting thing about the *SOM50* on acoustic guitar is that the placement of the mic barely changed the perceived sound of the guitar. Almost anywhere between the 14th fret and the butt end of the guitar sounded well balanced and articulate, as long as I stayed at least 8" or more from the guitar. I don't usually mic acoustic in a stereo configuration for pop records, but I tried both an X-Y and a spaced pair of *SOM50s* and found that a spaced pair produced



### THE MA-301fet

Multi-pattern FET Condenser Microphone

"Congratulations, David Royer. You have built the mic that I had designed in my head — and it sounds as wonderful as I had imagined."

**Dr. Fred Bashour**  
(Everything Audio Network)

[www.mojaveaudio.com](http://www.mojaveaudio.com)



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