



Thermionic Culture The Swift

GEORGE SHILLING'S adds some Air to his mix

Vic Keary's latest design is a 2 channel equaliser, named after Britain's fastest bird in level flight, with the philosophy that it is quick and easy to use. The Swift is all-valve (of course), and hand made in England, using a generous 3U rack case and chassis similar to the classic Phoenix compressor, with plenty of venting for the four valves. Combining new and old, like the Little Red Bustard (*Resolution* v15.2), the input valves are American NOS GE 5965s, whilst output tubes are brand new JJ ECC 802S. The latter are similar to the more familiar ECC82/12AU7 but with extra large anodes for a cleaner output up to a higher level.

Like the Phoenix, the main electronics are mounted in the base of the chassis, with connections on its rear for audio — input XLRs are balanced, while the outputs are unbalanced — a balanced option is available utilising Sowter transformers. The IEC socket is fused and accompanied by a voltage selector. The front panel layout comprises discrete controls for each channel each arranged in a row, one above the other, with the master Gain and Bypass controls in a third row below. Vertical white lines clearly delineate the EQ bands and the control legend is clear white on black — everything is easily readable — even in the most moody studio lighting.

Each channel's row of EQ controls starts from the left with a Bass band using a continuous +/-11dB pot, and a choice of 50 or 100Hz on a toggle switch. Keary has based the main electronics around a 1950s EMI desk, but with extended frequency response at the top and bottom. This is a Baxandall type active shelving EQ which sounds broad and smooth. The next band is a (passive) Mid Cut with a continuous pot, and four

frequencies chosen with a switched knob: 350Hz, 700Hz, 2kHz and 7kHz, and three Q settings which allow a maximum range of 15, 10 or 5dB. The lowest frequency is great for mud removal — and especially good for reducing unwanted proximity effect, and 700Hz is good for a bit of de-clogging when things get dense. 2kHz takes away nasties, especially when vocals get too harsh, and 7kHz reduces harshness, with the three different bandwidths providing useful variation from broad to fairly (but not overly) narrow. A similarly featured Mid Lift is next, this is also passive and loosely Pultec-based. The centre frequencies are 1kHz, 2kHz, 3kHz and 4.5kHz for varying degrees of boost perhaps associated with telephone, transistor radio or general midrange (controlled) aggression, richness or clarity. The different Q settings allow a maximum lift of 17, 10 or 8dB in the H, M or L positions respectively. The range of adjustment on both Mid sections is great for subtle or unsubtle tonal changes, but if 15 or 17dB seems a lot, even at full-tilt it's pretty smooth. A Presence knob follows, with settings labelled 0, 1, 2 and 3. This gives a broad preset lift to mid/high frequencies, and is based on a design of Vic's from 1963, previously used in his own mixing desks. It acts partly as a high pass shelf curve, then goes to a broad peak, followed by a drop at the upper audible range of the curve, with peak frequencies of 0.9kHz, 2kHz or 4kHz. These are all useful for adding clarity, the 4kHz especially doing the old "blanket removal" trick particularly well. I liked position 1 for enhancing bass guitar twang. The Treble section is another Baxandall shelf, again with a +/-11dB pot, and a choice of 7kHz or 12kHz. Adding some 12kHz provides a wonderful sparkle. After this is an Air

knob which is a pot with a range of 0-10, providing a beautiful sheen from 7kHz upwards — its peak is at 30kHz; this section is passive. The final control seems slightly misplaced as it is a switched High Pass Filter, which logically should perhaps be situated far left. Main settings are 0 (bypass), 12Hz, 24Hz, 48Hz and 68Hz, all of which are 12dB per octave filters. The final position is a 6dB per octave cut from 2kHz, levelling out at 400Hz, then cutting again at 6dB per octave from 48Hz. A suggestion is to combine this with some Bass lift for a Pultec style curve. With the Bass boosted to about 4 (and Gain clicked up to compensate for the filter) the low end of the mix seemed tighter and less boomy, yet solid and weighty — especially with the boost set at 50Hz. Set to 100Hz a bit more warmth was achieved, and either way, across a busy and fairly epic female ballad's mix the vocals seemed clearer, and the whole thing sounded a bit more coherent.

The bottom row of controls include switched Gain knobs with four clicks up to 3dB and six clicks down to -4.5dB, plus adjacent toggles to pad down a further 6dB. Having switches instead of pots ensures accurate tracking of left and right for comparisons, although it precludes very small corrective adjustments between left and right if there are problems elsewhere. There are (true hardware) Bypass toggles, and far right the big Power toggle and a green On lamp.

With the various bands it sometimes feels like you have more than one EQ — there are effectively three possible methods of lifting the high frequencies, with Presence, Treble and Air. Sometimes a tiny little bit of each of the Treble and Air bands sounds great; if adding in one of the Presence clicks isn't too much, you feel you've certainly covered all the possibilities. The Mid Boost is particularly good for big electric guitar sounds, adding huge richness and poke without making things nasty. Any instrument which needs help poking through the mix can always be helped with one of the Presence settings. One very small criticism is that the Bass and Treble knobs lack a centre detent, but they are large knobs with clear markings so it's not hard to set them to zero with reasonable accuracy.

The Swift is a fabulous general purpose EQ with generally broad characteristics, but it still manages to pack a punch. It has a big sound and there is a smoothness to it without feeling gloopy, with well chosen frequencies and gain ranges. With a clearly arranged front panel it is certainly quick and easy to set. Subtle yet very pleasant enhancement is easy to achieve. If you push it hard, The Swift achieves dramatic tonal changes without sounding unpleasant. I thoroughly enjoyed using it across the mix, but it was equally useful during recording and overdubbing, where few recordings didn't benefit from some sort of enhancement. Even just running signal through it perhaps with just the bass filter seemed to solidify things. The sonic performance is remarkable, with an unbelievably low noise floor, incredibly low distortion, and a massive frequency range. Unlike some modern pretenders who think valve warmth means hyping up the drive and distortion, Vic has made The Swift as clean as a whistle, whilst sounding big, solid and grown up. It's got wings, and is a fast track to great sound. ■

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| PROS | Wonderfully natural sounding EQ, astonishingly clean sonics. |
| CONS | No centre detents or band bypass switches. |

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