

A-DESIGNS PACIFICA

Analogue 'classics' are being 'rediscovered' and 're-issued' faster than you can say "digital sux", but A-Designs has reworked this classic American Quad Eight design without the hype.

Text: Greg Walker



► While classic Neve, API and EMI microphone preamps have been lovingly re-issued in recent times either by, or with considerable help from, their original manufacturers (not counting the many clone versions kicking about), another classic US console design has been left in the shadows somewhat during this vintage audio revival. The Quad Eight Ventura, Pacifica and Coronado consoles (which were made in Hollywood in the '70s) were also renowned at the time for their great sound, and many classic films and records were made with them (indeed Bigjesusburger studios in Sydney still runs a Quad Eight Pacifica room that's a favourite with bands and producers).

One factor that has made the old QE channel strips more problematic to custom rack – apart from their size and length – has always been their unusual 28V power requirements, which has generally led to higher racking costs, which in turn has impacted on their latter day popularity. Fortunately, Peter Montessi and his California-based A-Designs have stepped in to fill this gap in the re-issue market. Teaming up with audio designer, Jon Erickson, the company has spent several years of painstaking research and testing before producing a range of Quad Eight-based units, including the 1U 'Pacifica' model and a series of API 500-style rack units with different transformers for tonal options. In this review I'll be looking at the flagship two-channel Pacifica.

QUAD EIGHT RACK

The Pacifica is A-Designs' tribute to the Quad Eight console of the same name. Not surprisingly, therefore, this outboard two-channel preamp retains the original cream panel and red anodised metal knob colour scheme of the classically styled Pacifica. It's a solid-state, dual-mono unit with standard XLR microphone and ¼-inch Hi-Z inputs. However, while it's certainly *based* on the original QE electronics, it's important to note that it's not exactly a clone. Tonally it is very similar to the Pacifica console's mic preamps, but the circuits in the A-Designs rack unit have been slightly modified to bring them in line with modern demands and connection requirements.

Taking the Pacifica out of the box, I was immediately impressed by the build quality and the funky cream and red aesthetic. Each channel features a ¼-inch jack input, a red phantom power button with associated LED to show when the 48V feed is active, two grey buttons for –20dB

pad and phase reverse and a large, silky smooth rotary gain control, which, in and of itself, inspires confidence. The internal toroidal power supply is accessed via a standard IEC plug and activated by a small front panel switch. There are no other bells and whistles to speak of, and the uncluttered front panel layout suggests that the important thing here is what the preamp does to your sounds.

THE HOLLYWOOD SOUND

I've been enjoying the regular use of a friends' Quad Eight preamp rack in recent times and so it was with great interest that I engaged the services of the Pacifica. The first task the Pacifica performed was on a drumkit room mic, where I found its sound to be eminently usable. Subsequently, I used it on close-miked acoustics, with ribbon and dynamic mics on amp cabinets, snare and kick drums, vocals, violins, BVs and percussion. Every job I tried it on and every mic I plugged into it sounded great, with plenty of depth and detail.

The Pacifica shares the same general characteristics as the vintage Quad Eights I've heard – tonally it has a hefty yet fairly neutral tone, making it a very versatile and reliable mic pre. I keep coming back to the phrase 'full-bodied' to describe this preamp; it doesn't unduly colour the sound but everything comes back sounding full, rich and detailed. The Pacifica has bucketloads of gain (72dB) and low noise – so it was a real winner on my Octava and RCA ribbon mics. Electric guitars and drums, in particular, seemed to really benefit from the Pacifica's tonal flavour, lacking that hype and fizz that can sometimes work against you in those applications. On vocals it provided a nice balance of body and clarity and had plenty of thump and snap for snare and kick drum duties.

I found it hard to fault this preamp. The dual-mono format provides obvious scope for various stereo miking and DI applications, and while it doesn't exhibit the overtly retro tone of a Neve or EMI, the Quad Eight sound is a classic in its own right. A-Designs has done a marvellous job in bringing that sound back into circulation, and at a reasonably accessible price. The Pacifica is one piece of handcrafted US audio heritage that is definitely worth investigating. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$2995

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Pros
Versatile and classic full-bodied sound.
Great build quality and stylish looks.
No bells and whistles.
Alternative to the ubiquitous Neve sound.

Cons
No bells and whistles.

Summary
Quality successor to the Quad Eight mic pres of yore. Stylish looks and powerful sonic performance with just a tickle more presence than the originals. Destined to take its place amongst the great re-issues of recent times.