

Locomotive Audio: Model 14B tube compressor

REVIEWED in Tape Op Magazine
by JESSE LAUTER



The AES Convention is one of the more entertaining and overwhelming events in our little universe of audio. I flew out to Los Angeles for the conference this past October and walked the convention floor several times over to mostly familiar sites. One booth caught my eye and eventually my ear. Locomotive Audio, a new company out of St. Louis, was introducing itself to the world with its beautiful light-steel-blue tube compressor/limiter, the Model 14B, as well as a dual channel mic preamp, the Model 286A.

Dozens of people were hovering around this booth throughout the weekend, naturally attracted to Locomotive's graceful aesthetic, but how good did the 14B sound? It's always hard to tell on the convention floor, even with a great pair of headphones. I was able to do some interesting stuff on the 14B with drum samples that were running off a laptop, but I was too overwhelmed by the extraneous noises in the hall to make an honest decision about the piece. Fortunately, I ran into company founder Eric Strouth at a bar nearby while watching the NLCS playoffs. He told me he quit his job in marketing only several months prior to commit himself to putting Locomotive Audio on the map, because he believed his products were that good and stood up to the competition. He agreed to let me demo his flagship unit, the 14B (after my beloved San Francisco Giants ransacked his Cardinals). What I came to discover is that this new compressor is a welcome and unique addition to a fairly crowded field of boutique and copycat compressors. It sounds as good as it looks.



Strouth designed the 14B as a hybrid of several classic compressors — with a front-end similar to the Universal Audio 175B and 176 (but with slower attack speeds), an output like the Gates Sta-Level (but faster and more ability to smash), and inspiration taken from the Collins 26U — so it's essentially like nothing else on the market. It's handmade, and you can instantly tell that Strouth puts a lot of care into every detail.

The first time I fired up the 14B was for a mix revision session. The artist, Pythias Braswell, is a wonderful folk singer- songwriter from Hudson, NY. Pythias had minor notes about instrument rides and some edits. After reviewing my mixes, I decided the vocals needed to be addressed, so I threw the 14B on the back end of our vocal chain. The instant I patched in the 14B, all three of us — Pythias, the producer Kenny Siegal, and I — lit up. The vocal was already highly processed and they thought it was already in a solid place, but suddenly, it became rounder without being too overwhelming, focusing the mix and giving Pythias a strength that existed somewhere on that tape but hadn't yet revealed itself in this way. The midrange to the upper-mids were bumped but had this silky smoothness that made us all start high-fiving one another. I was complicit with Pythias's record before, but I can honestly say the 14B saved the album.

The next time I used the 14B was for a tracking session for a young balladeer from Scotland named Lorkin O'Reilly — again, primarily on vocals. Lorkin's music is in the vein of the great English folk singers like Nick Drake and Donovan. The 14B, set in limiter mode, created the syrupy

sound that you desire from a variable-mu compressor, making a light-touch singer feel as though he's crooning right in your eardrum — augmenting the high end of the voice but also adding more depth and knock to the singer's bottom register. Lorkin was thrilled, to say the least. At one point, I accidentally turned the attack setting fully counterclockwise; it clicked off, and I realized the compression was off and the 14B was acting as a line amp. I decided to do something out of left field and drive the input of Lorkin's acoustic guitar mic extra hot and came the closest I've ever gotten to the highly sought-after distorted-acoustic sound on Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*.

I later did experiments with bass and various drums on some down time, and the enhancements were immediately noticeable, even when the 14B was not compressing. I could hear an extremely musical sound likely to do with the distinctive combination of tubes — a 6BC8, a 12AY7, and two 6V6s.

The 14B is stereo-linkable, but I didn't get to utilize that feature with my single demo unit; however, I have a feeling it would make me a very happy camper if I did. The controls are variable, so I was taking a lot of notes and pictures — something that one cannot forget to do in a day and age when the artist expects precise recall, even with analog gear. You may be asking yourself if the 14B can stand up to other great boutique tube compressors on the market like the Retro Instruments 176 or Sta-Level. As someone who is a fan of Retro Instruments gear but doesn't own any, it's hard to say, but my feeling is that it is just different — another excellent color in an immense palette we have to choose from. Ultimately, I'm excited to put the 14B to further use while I look forward to more products from Locomotive Audio. Gearheads, pay attention.