



Audition

We test the best of the rest
of the month's new gear

Photography Olly Curtis & Joseph Brånston

VIDEO DEMO <http://bit.ly/guitaristextra>

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EFFECTRODE SR-71 BLACKBIRD DRIVE/ PREAMP & LEVELING AMPLIFIER £359 EACH

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In today's crowded market, Effectrode's unique valve-powered pedals have won it a place in some of the most revered signal chains in the world. Never one to stand still for long, Effectrode recently introduced a new version of its best-selling SR-71 preamp and a mouth-watering new product, the Leveling Amplifier.

We've looked at Effectrode's mighty Blackbird drive pedal before. However, the new version has significant enhancements, as Effectrode's Phil Taylor explains: "Pretty much every resistor and capacitor in the signal path has been adjusted in order to improve the musicality of the Blackbird's distortion. Technically, we're attempting to minimise blocking distortion, which occurs in all tube preamp circuits along with the more well-known clipping distortion. Blocking distortion can add a little grit and edge to the tone, but too much can sound harsh. I'm pretty sure this is exactly what Alexander Dumble was also working towards in his preamp sections in his custom amps in the 70s."

The Blackbird's drive channel has gain and volume controls, the clean channel has a single volume control, each with separate EQs, while the two footswitches toggle the clean and drive channels and bypass. The new Blackbird also has a transformer-isolated balanced output, replacing the speaker-emulated output in earlier versions.

As the name suggests, the Leveling Amplifier is a type of compressor. In recording studios, a leveller is a sort of crossover between a compressor and a limiter: it reduces dynamic range like a compressor and automatically amplifies the signal to make up for the reduced dynamics. They are often used on final mixes to add punch and make things more listenable. Like the SR-71, the Leveling Amplifier has three dual triode valves (on this sample, an optional trio of very expensive Philips NOS, available as an upcharge over the regular JJs while stocks last).

The Leveling Amplifier's controls will be familiar to anyone who's used a studio compressor. There are three large knobs for peak reduction, gain and a footswitchable boost, which adds up to around 6dB when needed. Two smaller red pots govern the Attack and Knee, which influence how the Leveling Amplifier compresses the signal, making it subtler and more transparent if needed. Like the SR-71, the Leveling Amplifier features a transformer-isolated balanced output, for the best direct-to-desk quality. On the back edge, together with in/out and remote switching jacks, there are two small toggle switches, one to set the basic operating level at +6, +12 or +18dB, the second to activate Dynamic EQ. "The Peak and Knee controls were requested by David

Gilmour's tech [also spookily called Phil Taylor – Ed] as a mod on the Effectrode PC-2A compressor," Phil Taylor explains, "which is why they're here on our new Leveling amp. The Dynamic EQ switch dynamically restores the high frequencies lost when the Leveling amplifier is compressing the signal. The heavier the compression, the harder it works to restore higher frequencies."

Sounds

In use, the new Blackbird is exceptionally quiet with almost inaudible hiss and hum levels. The drive effects cover the full spectrum of vintage and modern tones, going from Dumble-like smoothness to a more aggressive bite with practically endless sustain. The clean channel is beautiful, with a pure, glassy treble that's reminiscent of the best Blackface amps. The balanced output retains plenty of real-amp dynamics and takes analogue and digital EQ nicely for an infinite range of high-quality recorded sounds.

The Leveling Amplifier is super-quiet and transparent, adding a subtle warmth, with enhanced clarity at lower settings. We tried it on a variety of instruments with impressive results, particularly on a lap steel, where the Effectrode added sustain and evened out the results of some less than perfect picking to give a very pro-sounding recording.

Verdict

Like all Effectrode products, these new pedals aren't cheap, but they're unique and superbly made. The SR-71 is one of the best all-valve preamp pedals money can buy; the new balanced output makes it much more studio-friendly, while a practically infinite range of tone makes it a must-have for amp tweekers. The Leveling Amplifier is more usable and sounds better than some high-end rack comp/limiters, giving it a potential home in many project studios as well as pedalboards. If you want to put real vintage valve tone at your toes, there's really no alternative. Get in touch with Effectrode now. **[NG]**



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BLACKBIRD DRIVE/
PREAMP**

9/10



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