

Wes Audio Beta76



FET Compressor-limiter

The Urei 1176 is one of those classic compressor-limiters that many boutique manufacturers are now trying to put their own spin on. What do Wes Audio bring to the party?

MATT HOUGHTON

There's an increasing trend for small manufacturers to take the design of a classic piece of outboard gear and improve on it, whether by enhancing the technical performance, adding or tweaking functionality, or simply swapping out components for replacements that are deemed more sonically desirable — and which are usually correspondingly more expensive! The Urei/Universal Audio 1176 compressor limiter is one of the more popular processors to be aped and improved upon, not least by Universal Audio themselves. The 'official' design has undergone several revisions over the years, and while all retain the same essential FET compression characteristics, there are models that employ input and output transformers and others that use solid-state circuitry for the input and a transformer on the output. Some models even offer a different choice of ratios. Still more tweaks have been made by other manufacturers: by way of

example, check out my review of Lindell Audio's 17x compressor in SOS February 2012 (www.soundonsound.com/sos/feb12/articles/lindell-17x.htm). The latest such product is Wes Audio's Beta76 Limiting Amplifier. Or β 76, for short.

Wes Audio are one of several Polish companies to take their products into Western markets in recent years (other examples to appear in SOS include IGS Audio, Looptrotter and Bettermaker). As the product name implies, the β 76 isn't Wes Audio's first recreation of an 1176: they started with what was pretty much a clone, but have introduced some interesting tweaks in this new version.

Overview

The β 76 makes a very promising first impression. The silk-screened, brushed stainless-steel front panel feels sturdy, the high-quality meter is brightly (though far from garishly) lit, giving off a satisfyingly warm orange glow, and the knobs and switches all feel just as they should do. In short, if this

processor didn't have the words 'Wes Audio β 76 Limiting Amplifier' printed on the front panel, you could be forgiven for assuming, on first glance, that this was an 1176.

Wes Audio Beta76 £899

PROS

- Great-sounding and well made.
- More functionality than an 1176.
- Versatile.
- Competitively priced.

CONS

- None, really, although a stereo or dual-mono version should bring the cost down for anyone wanting to use these on a drum bus.

SUMMARY

Wes Audio started out by cloning the 1176 but have since added some useful functionality that means the Beta76 may have more appeal for some people than the product which inspired it.



On closer examination, though, there are differences. First off, there's a side-chain filter, which is switched in and out and governed by a single button, which in turn controls a relay switch. This allows you to roll the bottom end off the control signal at 60, 80 or 150Hz, which is a useful touch. Essentially, it allows you to let through energetic low frequencies without triggering compression.

Above this button and the associated LEDs is a similar switch/relay combination that allows the user to flip between what are described as 'Modern' and 'Vintage' modes. This is a rarer modification to the design, which enables you to change the input balancing stage between solid-state ('Modern') and Carnhill transformer-coupled ('Vintage') circuitry. The output transformer is also a Carnhill model.

Finally, there's a link function, which differs slightly from the UA approach, and which allows you to connect two of these mono devices together via a jack lead for stereo operation. In all other respects, the controls resemble those of a modern 1176LN: there are four switches to determine the compression ratio (4:1, 8:1, 12:1 and 20:1 are on offer, and it's also possible to use the famous 'all-buttons' mode to give you hard limiting); and adjacent to the meter are four further buttons, one of which switches the unit on and off, another that bypasses »



» the compressor and the meter, and two more to select the behaviour of the meter.

Sound Performance?

The two most important issues, of course, are how good this thing sounds, and — to some people, at any rate — how close it sounds to an 'authentic' 1176. I use the inverted commas, because, as I outlined earlier, there are several different 1176 models, each of which sound different, that may be described with that word!

Let's start by assessing the β 76 in its own right. I tried using it on a variety of sources, from male lead vocals, acoustic guitar and piano to a drum bus, taking in electric bass and kick-drum channels along the way. On male vocals, this is a lovely, smooth-sounding compressor, whichever mode it is used in. Comparing it with several of the best 1176 modelling plug-ins on gentle ratios with about 5-7dB of gain reduction, the difference in use was night and day, with the β 76 easily coming out on top against even the very best-performing plug-in, the effect being rather like the lifting of a thin veil, or the wiping away of condensation from your windscreen: the sort of thing you don't realise is such a problem until it has gone away! As with all good hardware, achieving this sort of result was effortless,

too. The controls are easy to use, even when making very fine adjustments, and the silk-screened legending is easy to read or capture on camera for later recall.

Used with more assertive settings on bass guitar and the drum bus, the side-chain filter really shows its worth. (By choice, I'd have something like this feature on every compressor, as it enables you to achieve much more depth and solidity from pretty much any type of dynamics processor). This is also where the differences between the vintage and modern modes becomes more noticeable: when the input is driven a bit harder, the subtle harmonic distortions caused by the vintage-mode's transformer are rather more noticeable. While I should stress that this effect is subtle, it's usually for the better. In fact, I'm struggling to think of a situation in which I'd prefer to use the modern mode — as one uncharitable forum poster said (I paraphrase), "Aah... so you can choose between the version everyone loves and the one no-one wants!" I'm sure there are some people out there who will like the option, though, and, if nothing else, it serves to provide a good bit of aural education.

Anyway, to sum up the sound, it is lovely; and to sum up this compressor more generally, it is versatile, well made and easy to use. All that we need to consider now is how well it does the job of standing in for a real 1176. I should declare that I didn't have a Urei or Universal Audio 1176 to hand during these tests, but I have used many different versions over the years, and was able to compare the β 76 with the plug-in offerings from UA, Waves and IK Multimedia, amongst others — and I have in the past compared those plug-ins directly with several different revisions of the 1176. Based on my review tests, I'd say that the β 76 comes very,

Move along, move along, nothing to see here! Apart from the balanced XLR I/O, the IEC power inlet and the jack-socket-based link facility, that is...

close to sounding like a 'real' 1176. If it 'falls down' anywhere, it's arguably in the release characteristics, which, from memory, seem ever so slightly different from the 1176 — that's not 'bad', you understand, merely 'different'. I couldn't, for example, get an acoustic drum loop to bounce in quite the same way when slamming it. That said, in most situations I wouldn't think twice about using this in the same place as an 1176.

Verdict

So the β 76 may not *quite* be an 1176 in some respects, but in others it's a whole lot more, particularly given the contribution of the side-chain filters. It's also a beautifully made and wonderful-sounding compressor in its own right. I'd happily trade the switchable modes for just the transformer version, and have that money spent on a wet/dry control — but I'm sure some people will appreciate the option.

The Wes Audio β 76 also represents decent value for money for anyone wanting a good-sounding, reliable workhorse compressor. My only real regret is that, despite having a link option, it's a mono device: personally, I'd prefer this in stereo — and I resent having to pay for the two cases and PSUs in order to use this it on stereo material. Hmm... I wonder, if I asked nicely, whether Wes Audio would consider making a stereo/dual-mono version? **///**

Alternatives

There are several different takes on the 1176 design. The **Lindell Audio 17x**, for example, offers side-chain filtering, as does the **Slate Pro Audio Dragon**. Both also offer a wet/dry blend control for instant parallel compression, which the Wes Audio design does not, but they're rather more expensive. **Serpent Audio** have recently announced the **Splice** compressor, which will be of interest to anyone who owns a 500-series rack, and that should be on sale by the time you read this. **Universal Audio** still sell the **1176LN**, of course, and there's a healthy second-hand market for older models too!

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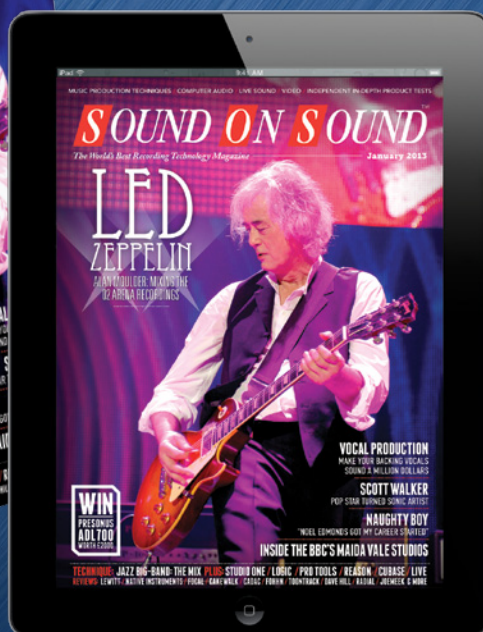
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