JDK Audio
V10 500-series mic preamp
V12 500-series compressor

Wouldn't you love to arrive at work in the morning to find a huge box from API Audio sitting on your desk? I was actually expecting a shoebox-size package from JDK Audio (the creative brand offshoot of API) containing just one each of their newly introduced *V10* preamp and *V12* compressor 500-series modules — exact circuit replications of the popular R20 and R22 rackmount units. In an obvious administrative oversight or paperwork mixup (wink-wink, nudge-nudge), the fine folks at API sent me one pair each of the *V10*, *V12*, and V14 sweepable 4-band EQ modules [*Tape Op* #68], plus a nice 6-pack API Lunchbox chassis.

To dispel any rumors, the *V10* and R20 are *not* based on any classic API preamp that I'm aware of. Rather, it's a modern, transformerless design, paired with a THAT Corporation 1512 Mic Preamp IC. (See Garrett Haines' description of this IC in his review of the Seventh Circle Audio T15 mic preamp [*Tape Op* #84] that will hereby melt your brain.) This "less is more" approach (less in the signal's way, more on the output) results in a very natural sound, with super-low noise levels and virtually zero distortion — never mean and always clean. Like all three of the JDK 500-series units, the *V10* incorporates a solid build, easy-to-read faceplate, and shielded case. Some 500-series manufacturers skip the shielding, making it difficult to slide their modules into a chassis — the JDKs slotted effortlessly.

The *V10* sports gains of 54 dB (mic) and 45 dB (line/instrument), adjustable via a large, continuously-variable gain knob. After continued, almost-daily use over a three week period, not once did I ever bump the gain pot, accidentally changing levels while reaching for the *V10*'s other sturdy controls (phantom power, polarity reverse, pad, and mic/line switches). In past experience, the cramped faceplates of many 500-series modules were turnoffs to me — with their tiny knobs and switches seeming so fragile and meek (spoken in a "meow meow" kitty voice). All three JDKs are laid out simply and just feel sturdier than many other 500s.

The *V10* pair saw use on nearly every signal source that came through the door — vocals, guitars (electric and acoustic), drums (close mics and overheads), strings, electric bass (mic'ed and direct), acoustic bass, and electronic instruments. Again, these preamps are not like the traditional APIs — think more smooth and open. In nearly all applications, I was surprised at how "right'" they sounded on every source, especially when used as a DI (via the Neutrik Combo jack on the front panel). It's hard to speak on the character of a preamp that's designed to be transparent. The only instances where I noted preamp coloration was with high-frequency transients on "cracky" snare rimshots, loud banjo picking, and "face melting" telecaster solos. In those circumstances, I found the harmonic changes to be helpful in reassessing mic selection or placement. In some cases, tweaking the gain in combination with use of the pad, even at moderate (not high) levels, I was able to do some "shaping."

Because of its transparent design, I often compared the *V10* to my Grace Design m101 [*Tape Op* #68]. Though the Grace has a more "hi-fi" vibe, at no time was I dissatisfied with the *V10*'s performance. In fact, I quickly became so comfortable with the *V10*s, that I forgot they were there —a compliment, not a slight. After my time with the JDKs, I've gained a better understanding of what my mics can and can't do. Though my complaints are few — the *V10* has no high-pass filter, and it's not ideally suited for ribbon mics — its honest sound, price point, and durability will gain your trust though.

As stated at the intro of this review, the JDK *V12* compressor is the R22 in a 500-series module. The only difference I can see is that linked *V12* units don't operate in traditional master/slave mode. (Due to limitations of the 500-series format, even though the linked units can share a common summed link bus if the chassis provides one, the controls of each unit must be set individually.) Though the popular API 2500 [*Tape Op* #52] and JDK compressors both utilize API's patented *Thrust* circuit feature, explained as a high-pass filter placed in front of the RMS detector, the JDK compressor is born from a different beast. The *V12* uses the same circuit originally designed for ATI Paragon consoles, reveled as an easy-to-use dynamics controller in the live sound realm.

Again, the faceplate is well-labeled, with durable knobs for threshold, ratio (1:1 to 10:1), and makeup gain (20 dB). LED meters are offered for output level (jumper switchable to input level), threshold, and gain reduction. Sturdy switches control the aforementioned Thrust mode, hard/soft knee, hard-relay bypass, and link modes.

My first question was, "Where're the attack and release controls?" There are none on the *V12*; it uses an automatic timing circuit. My perception is that time constants adjust according to the ratio and threshold settings, combined with sensing of incoming transients. It all looked pretty simple from the outside, so I started throwing the compressor on individual tracks (bass, vocals, guitars, etc.), as well as on buses (drum and mix mostly), before bothering to read any instructions. I just kinda tweaked out for a few days. Killing slow-moving insects became infinitely more difficult than dialing in the *V12*. I lost touch with reality for a while, because it just sounded cool on everything — in a really hands-off, natural way. After recovering from "binge" compressing, I took a closer look at the features.

Regardless of any technical definition of the Thrust circuit, to my ears, it adds a little high-end sparkle and low-end punch, tunable with the knee switch. I tried Thrust mode on just about everything. You'll know with a few flips whether or not it will work for the program material. I've found that it really helps even out a bass guitar performance while adding a really natural attack. It makes the kick and overheads on a drum bus sound like they should. It glues the mix.

In general, the *V12* is as simple and fun to use as a plug-in. I'm already addicted to it. Even at higher ratios, individual tracks seem to maintain their openness but feel more lively. It's a great choice for softly-leveling vocals. I can definitely see why this compressor design was originally so popular with live sound engineers. The *V12* is a perfect, vibey choice for smoothing out performances in a very musical and natural way. My only complaint with the *V12* is that there's not a plug-in version!

Though I won't be covering the V14 EQs in this review, I found them to be great at isolated, midrange frequency boosts and cuts. All three of JDK's 500-series modules are built to last, easy to use, and very natural-sounding. To be honest, I'd always viewed JDK as the "green headed" stepchild of the API line — definitely not the case! All three 500-series modules would be an asset to *any* rack. Highly recommended!

($695 MSRP each; www.jdkaudio.com) –SM