

Joemeek Micromeek MQ3 Recording Interface

Three professional grade tools are packed into this little green half-rack unit with surprisingly big results

Review by Dominic Hilton

The Micromeek MQ3 combines an input amplifier with an optical compressor and Joemeek's proprietary Meequalizer eq system. The British company describes its new device as an "input conditioner" that has been designed to get the best performance from musical instruments, microphones, recorders and final mixes, all with a competitively low price tag.

Following a design philosophy similar to other Joemeek products that aim to replicate the warmth and presence of vintage recording consoles (like the British Channel VC6Q), the MQ3 is also laid out like a single "strip in a box." Unlike some of the more expensive products that feature many modes and controls, the MQ3 offers cost-effective simplicity. The other products in the Joemeek range, including the SC2 compressor, have been met with critical acclaim and won awards, which leaves this little green guy with some big shoes to fill.

Meet the Meek

The MQ3 arrives housed in a rugged steel case, with a separate wall-wart power supply and the trademark alien-green fascia. The compact but uncluttered front panel consists of eight rotary controls, three push-button switches and various LED indicators that cover the preamp, compressor and eq functions. The rotary controls have a smooth, positive feel and clear level markers, and both the input gain and output volume pots have incrementally notched ranges for accurate adjustment of these critical controls.

The rear panel features I/O, beginning with a choice of high impedance, unbalanced line level or balanced XLR inputs, the latter with an LED-indicated push-button for phantom power. A push-button is provided on the front panel to select between these two inputs.

Output is via a pair of 1/4" balanced low-impedance jacks, connected in parallel and allowing the signal to be split into a recording output and another output for separate monitoring. The output is auto-balancing and can be unbalanced without affecting the output level. An insert is provided for outboard effects (this is normalled when not in use) and a mix input allows a second signal to be mixed with the main signal, post-eq and pre-compression – simultaneous recording of voice and acoustic guitar is a suggested use for this feature.

Premium pre

The MQ3, like all Joemeek products, was designed by Ted Fletcher who worked with the legendary producer and company namesake in the mid 1960s. Fletcher's designs are borne from years of experience, including work for the BBC, which taught him the value of combining simple practicality with old-world "musical" signal processing. This is perfectly illustrated by the MQ3's unique CurrentSense input amplifier, whose single gain control hides a number of pro features.

Fletcher believes that controlled, flat low frequencies are the key to big sounds, and he designed the MQ3 with an extended frequency range down to below 20 Hz, thus avoiding low frequency phase shifts. Another inclusion is a massive overload margin, made possible by four complete stages of amplification providing over 30 dB of microphone headroom; the input will accept microphone levels from -70 dB to more than 0 dB. In addition to being very flexible in terms of input, the amplifier also offers extremely low noise performance.

Vintage squeeze

The MQ3's compressor is very different from modern VCA-based models – it uses a recreation of sixties-style photoelectric circuitry. Rather than combining the duties of compressor and limiter, the MQ3 has a soft threshold that maintains a predictable ratio until a certain level, at which point it returns to a more linear amplification, allowing transients through to maintain brightness.

Tailored for use with musical instruments, the controls include a variable Attack, and a Release with a range of 125 ms to 1.5 seconds for a broad range of effects. In addition to a Compression control that simultaneously adjusts compressor gain and threshold, there is also a bypass switch and a peak indicator LED.

Tone zone

The Meequalizer portion of the MQ3 is actually a three-band phase correcting equalizer with the Low, Mid and High controls set at 80 Hz, 1.5 kHz and 8 kHz respectively. The low and high knobs are shelving controls that offer the full level of lift and cut below 80 Hz and above 8 kHz, while the mid is a peaking control with a Q value of 1.

As high frequencies are added, the equalizer moves the phase of those frequencies forward, adding definition without harshness. This section also features a bypass switch and an indicator LED.

Outward bound

The output section of the MQ3 is simple but comprehensive. Alongside the aforementioned notched volume control, there is an overload LED, a power indicator LED and a four-segment input meter. Sensibly, all of the MQ3 LEDs are color-coded to

prevent confusion – dangerous stuff gets red lights, while healthy functions are green and yellow.

In effect

The clearly written manual includes some suggested settings for different applications, which we decided to use as a departure point for our bench test. The MQ3's first task was to breathe some life into a flat, boxy drum machine pattern – we began with the suggested “bass/drum” setting. With a little judicious tweaking, mainly with the input gain, we landed a vastly improved drum tone, with a big fat kick sound and a crisp, energized snare.

Although spatially compromised as a mono signal, the enhanced results took on an extra dimension in our demo track and retained a natural tone despite the high levels of compression. With a little extra eq fingerwork, this set-up also produced a tight and even electric bass tone with nice low-end definition.

The suggested setting for the often tricky task of miking an acoustic guitar makes use of an aggressive scooped eq and generous compression. We used our AKG condenser microphone. Again, the results were very pleasing with a minimum of twiddling, offering rich, low-end chunk and upper-end brilliance with refined silky presence.

Next we fed the MQ3 a typical emulated electric guitar signal via a Tech 21 SansAmp GT2 simulator with a range of clean and overdriven tones. Here we found the Meequalizer indispensable for honing the sound (the GT2 only has a two-band eq), while the compressor added creamy sustain to lead tones and sparkling punch to clean lines.

Finally we tried the critical vocal setting with our studio condenser and were rewarded with a full and warm up-front sound from the subtle eq and medium compression. In each case, the high headroom and minimal operating noise made the MQ3 a joy to use.

Meek but mighty

For those on a tight budget, the MQ3 will multi-task preamp and compressor duties with impressive sound quality, bringing pro-caliber sparkle to any project studio. The intelligent, friendly format would enable even the most technophobic recordist to achieve fine tones quickly and easily, while the flexible and comprehensive connections will accommodate users with more demanding applications. Once again, Joemeek proves that nothing beats four decades of front-line experience when it comes to designing studio gear.

Price: \$299.99

More from: Joemeek, dist. by PMI Audio Group, 23775 Madison St., Torrance, CA 90505. 310/373-9129, fax 310/373-4714, www.joemeek.com.