

Drawmer 1968 Mercenary Edition

Take a box that was ahead of its time and get an industry shaman to suggest some modifications. Then take the result and split off the compressor. Before you know it, it's 1968 and **GEORGE SHILLING** is suddenly a fan.



ASTONISHINGLY, THE DRAWMER 1960 has been around since 1983. Back then it was unique, and a forerunner of trends to come — here was a valve outboard compressor with mic preamps and DI built in, and it even included basic EQ. This was unheard of in the early 1980s — before the 1990s valve revival, and long before outboard mic preamps and voice channels were commonplace. Back then, a desk was usually used for pro recording! (*Yes and sometimes they even recorded more one than one track at a time. Ed*)

But despite the valves and switched settings, I have never thought the 1960 compressor sounded that great. It is always a struggle to find the ideal setting, and the compression is slow and gloupy. And early ones had crackly pots. However, the 1960 has some distinguished fans (*And you don't get much more distinguished than me. Ed*) and is still in production.

Fletcher, founder of Stateside pro-audio dealership Mercenary Audio (and also a knowledgeable recording engineer and notorious Internet discussion-board stirrer) shared my lack of enthusiasm for the 1960. The polite version of the story is on the mercenary.com website, but elsewhere I found a more illustrative quote. Drawmer's US distributor responded to his original rec.audio.pro rant, and to the credit of all parties, the Mercenary Edition 1969 eventually appeared, with a familiar feature set, and a front panel almost identical to the 1960, yet with significantly different circuitry inside.

The 1968 is the compressor section of the 1969, with a few enhancements. On the rear are XLRs for line inputs and outputs, plus TRS jacks for sidechain inserts. This, of course, lets you use an EQ to emphasise frequencies to effect such things as de-essing. On the front, each channel features pleasantly damped Threshold and Output Gain knobs and switched Attack and Release knobs. Toggle switches are provided for Power On and Stereo Link, and each channel features toggles for S/C Listen/Normal/Bypass, Meter VU+10/VU/GR and Big On/Off.

The fairly small VUs are clearly backlit using LEDs, and Ivor Drawmer has invented a clever system that gradually uses more red LEDs above 0VU — even in GR mode — you can't really miss this! And the +10 setting allows for hotter output levels — these are useful features not found on the 1969, and even with 'fully-red' meters it never sounds nasty. Stereo linking disables the right channel controls for Threshold, Attack, Release and Big, making the Left channel the master control, although meter and output toggles remain separately available, plus, sensibly, the Output Gain knobs. Their ranges cover a useful +/-20dB,

while the Threshold ranges from -30 to infinity (via +10) which should be enough for anyone.

Unlike the 1960 which uses a valve stage for the compressor, this uses a J-FET circuit for faster operation. And unlike the 1960's three Attack settings, there are now six, labelled 1 to 6 and ranging from 2ms to 50ms. Release times are fixed at 100, 500 and 1000ms, plus three programme-dependent settings, 200ms to 2s, 500ms to 5s and 1s to 10s (again labelled 1-6). There is no ratio control; the 1968 operates using a very effective continuous soft-knee. The faster character of the J-FET makes this a much more useable compressor than the 1960 ever was. It is a completely different animal; the compression breathes and sounds great, forgiving and fluid. The whole sonic picture is snazzier, clearer and well-defined. Unlike the constipated 1960. If they looked as different as they sounded, the Mercenary Editions would be metallic orange with chrome knobs!

When used with individual signals from vocals to bass guitar, the 1968 has a natural warmth with a classic American-style compression character — think UA 1176 or even Fairchild 670. The 1968 is perhaps crisper than those old models. It's smoother than the 1176, snappier than the Fairchild, but it certainly sounds as 'grown-up' as these classics.

The programme-dependent Release settings work really well, making heavy compression less obvious, the middle one of these working especially well on vocals. The Attack settings are quick enough to take the bulk out of drum hits — the fastest release settings are just about fast enough for any situation, and the slowest Attack and Release settings are certainly slow enough, with settings in between covering most eventualities. The 1968 also makes a terrific compressor for your drums group, allowing the kit to breathe and sound powerful.

Maniacal amounts of compression are possible without nasties, adding a friendly and forgiving crunch without horrid distortion. A gentle approach works fine, but it's difficult not to be tempted into cranking the Threshold further and further, such is the enjoyable nature of the compression. The tube output section adds a lovely warmth to the sonic character when driven.

The Big switches on each channel take a chunk of low-end out of the compressor sidechain (it's a 100Hz high-pass filter) allowing for a sturdier low-end and much less pumping when using the unit for bus compression, similar to the more complicated 'Thrust' function found on the excellent (but pricier) API 2500. I love this effect across the mix, it almost always sounds better than any complicated multiband 'finalizing'. The 1969 featured just the one Big switch; having one on each channel gives more flexibility if you want to, err, 'Big-up' just one channel when working in dual-mono mode.

The 1968 (UK£845 + VAT) sounds great on individual sounds and terrific as a mix compressor. Overall design is smart and easy to use, build quality is very high and audio performance is superb. Fletcher is keen to stress that Mercenary makes no royalty on these units, nor does the Mercenary dealership even get any special discount on them — they really do it purely for the love of having good gear available to use. It's a heartening story of collaboration and the end product is truly superb. ■

Contact

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PROS

Half the size of the 1969; better value if you don't need the 1969's mic preamps; terrific all-round compressor; 'Big' function makes it a fabulous bus compressor; British-ish!

CONS

Looks like a Drawmer (*Pathetic. Ed*)

EXTRAS

The DSL424 TwoPlusTwo combined dynamics processor includes two frequency conscious noise gates and two soft/hard knee compressors with variable threshold limiting. The channels may be front panel configured as four individual standalone processors, or as a stereo linked pair of compressor/limiters with a stereo linked pair of gates. Alternatively, any combination of processing can be achieved by rear panel patching.

