



SPL FRONTLINER 2800

There are channel strips and there are channel strips. This one kicks goals from all angles.

Text: **Greg Walker**

▶ SPL has been kicking some serious goals these last few years. Its sophisticated processors, particularly the hardware and software versions of its Transient Designer, have spread like a rash throughout the audio world. Other SPL hardware, like the 500-series modules and various innovative products such as the Transducer and the soon to be released Transpressor and M/S Master, are clear indicators of a company on the move. SPL doesn't seem remotely interested in rehashing old classics or following the well-worn path of others. They're mostly doing their own thing.

That said, the 'channel strip' seems a bit of an old fashioned idea, but lately, SPL and a few other high-end companies have been taking a fresh look into the format. Being a bit of a channel strip guy myself, it was with some interest that I unboxed the new SPL Frontliner 2800. Cosmetically, the Frontliner channel strip is reasonably easy on the eye with its 2RU silver faceplate generously endowed with dials, pushbuttons, toggle switches and a nice big backlit VU meter. Everything is generously proportioned and all the controls have a good professional feel to them. The continuously variable dials have centre indents where necessary, the pushbuttons have colourful backlit LEDs to clearly indicate their status and the toggle switches are firm to the touch. There's a cooling grille on top of the unit – which is clearly necessary as the Frontliner runs quietly but throws out a lot of heat – and an empty rack space must be left above it at all times.

Build quality is typically robust, with internal design features such as dual-toroidal power supplies, Burr Brown op amps in critical positions and a central star ground wiring scheme. The controls are well labeled and pretty straightforward in operation so getting up and running with it is a breeze, despite the profusion of electronic whizzery on offer – always a good sign in a more complicated design.

FRONT-LINER

The Frontliner has all the usual suspects lined up on the front panel. First cab off the rank is a hybrid semiconductor/tube preamp stage with separate gain controls for mic and line/D.I. signals. There's plenty of good clean gain available here and a reassuringly low noise floor. Push buttons engage a pad, high-

pass filter, polarity reverse and phantom power as well as a mic/line selector. There's also a jack input for Lo-Z sources.

Next comes a one-knob de-esser: switch it in and dial up the amount of decibels by which you want to reduce sibilance and off you go! A compressor stage comes next with variable threshold, attack, release, ratio and make-up gain controls offering plenty of compression options. There's also an 'auto' button that can take care of attack and release decisions if required. Next door to the compressor lives the EQ/Tube Saturation section, offering three bands of EQ and the now ubiquitous tube saturation knob for dirtying up signals. The first two EQ bands feature $\pm 12\text{dB}$ of gain, continuously variable from 30Hz – 700Hz and 680Hz – 15kHz respectively. The third band is a coil/capacitor filter aptly named 'Air', with a bell curve centred at 17.5kHz. This entire section can be bypassed or engaged with one button, meaning that if you want the EQ but not the tube saturation, you simply dial that process back to zero. You can also engage a button in the preamp section to increase the gain entering the tube circuit by 15dB, yielding more overt distortion.

Finally, on the far right of the unit is a set of external input routing buttons and a very well configured VU meter with toggle switches for output and gain reduction metering, 0/–10dB sensitivity and VU/PPM options. There's also a global mute switch and an A/D converter overload LED on the far right.

REAR ACCESS

Adding to this generous layout, the Frontliner has a couple of interesting tricks up its sleeve. Each processor section can be independently accessed via rear-mounted XLRs, which allows you to use the 2800 as a series of independent analogue tracking and/or mixing tools, as well as a more traditional full channel strip. This feature is further enhanced by the use of the external input-routing push buttons. For example, when the compressor and EQ buttons are engaged for a second or more, they light up, and continue to flash gently to indicate that they've been disconnected from the main signal chain and are available for patching into a separate source. Thus, you could mic a vocal through the pre-amp and de-esser while sending the output

of a snare from another mic pre through the SPL's compressor and EQ sections. When you want to reinstate these processors to the main chain you simply press the buttons again for a second or so, whereupon they stop flashing and return to their original positions in the internal chain – a pretty cool feature that allows you to make the most of the processing power with a minimum of external patching.

BACK PAIN

Round the back things are pretty crowded, not to mention somewhat confusing, given the legending on each of the processor module's XLR inputs and outputs is written upside down at the top and right way up at the bottom. Clearly this layout is designed to help you when you're peering over the back of the unit for patching purposes, but it tends to discombobulate the brain when looked at from the back, right-way-up (if you know what I mean). Anyway, you soon get used to it (kind of) and you certainly can't accuse SPL of neglecting their labelling. Sadly, the power switch is also located here and the rear panel design in general seems to assume you will always have the unit at the very top of your rack – if only the real world was like that! I have another two units that, for similar reasons, also vie for this top position... it's the source of ongoing irritation. To my mind, although it's admirable that SPL has endeavoured to improve the legibility of the Frontliner, the design layout is flawed from a user's perspective.

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

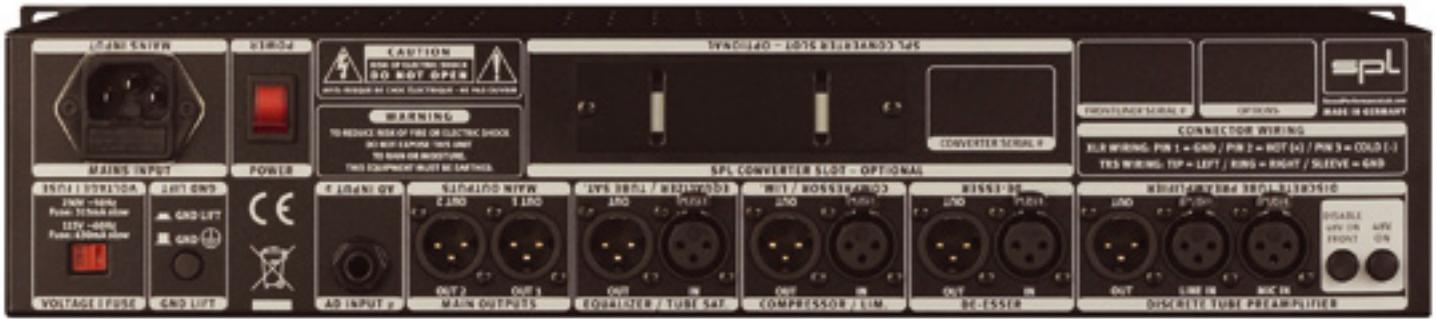
An optional A/D converter is available on the Frontliner that supports sample rates of 44.1 and 48k, with a 'x2' switch to access the faster speeds. Digital I/O is via RCA S/PDIF and there's an additional digital input with a small sync lock button. Speaking of small buttons, there's also one for ground lift and a second pair that further manage phantom power duties. There are, in fact, *three* buttons in total that control phantom power (as incredible as that may seem): two on the rear and one on the front. The first of these rear controls disables and overrides the front panel switch while the second allows you to either arm or disarm the phantom power from the rear. This setup is obviously provided to stop enthusiastic friends and/or interns from frying your vintage ribbon mics, so it's either an awesome feature or an unnecessary

one, depending on your mic collection and work practices. Either way, I suspect SPL will be taking a lot of calls from users complaining that their front-panel phantom switch is 'busted', when in fact it will simply be disabled. In any case I left them well alone during the review period and was happy with the front panel button and its clear lit/unlit 48V status indication.

WORKING AT THE FRONTLINE

So, no shortage of features then! But what's it all add up to? I was fortunate enough to have the Frontliner in service for a month or so during some pretty frantic sessions so I got to try it out in a variety of spaces on a multitude of sources with a bunch of different mics, as well as in some mix situations. First up I've got to say the Frontliner works beautifully as a vocal front-end on both male and female vocals. The mic pre is transparent and has a good tonal balance while at the same time imparting a subtle warmth to the signal. This gentle coloration doesn't stop it being a versatile pre, however, and there's enough gain to deal with soft ribbon and dynamic mic sources. The D.I. was also a winner on bass and mono keyboard sources, even direct electric guitars, and I had no hesitation in running critical sources through it, never once feeling the need to revert to my standard studio options.

The compressor is one of the highlights of the Frontliner, being of very high quality and musically transparent at lower gain reduction settings. I regularly found myself using it to control vocal and instrumental dynamics in the 3 – 5dB range using lower ratio settings and it behaved very smoothly indeed. At higher ratios I found it to be a little less bulletproof, although careful attention to the attack and release settings achieved some good effects. I had some joy engaging the auto button when I'd come to a compression cull-de-sac a few times too – it's a nice option to have. When slammed, the compressor doesn't create as pleasing an effect as, say, an API 525 or a UREI 1176, but this shortfall can be remedied down the line with some tube saturation so it's not such a big deal in the overall picture. The de-esser was perhaps my least favourite processor on offer; the interface obviously lacks much control but it certainly tames the esses as you increase the effect. Unfortunately I also found it to have a slight dulling and top-end smearing effect on the source (as do most de-essers I've ever used) so I often found myself



trying it and then turning it off. I generally mistrust de-essers it must be said, be they hardware or software based, and usually resort to manual volume corrections in my DAW for greater transparency and control.

The EQ/Tube Saturation section is easy to like. The two overlapping midrange bands taking care of general tone shaping duties, while the 'Air' band gives an effect similar in quality to Aphex's Aural Exciter. Too much fizz is obviously not a good thing but when used with care it's pretty cool – especially on percussion instruments and occasional vocals. The lack of Q control on the midrange EQs is a bit limiting, and it would have been nice to see a dedicated bass band, but overall I didn't find this set-up too restrictive as I've always liked the old fashioned 'bass and treble' style EQs anyway, and the fixed Qs seem well judged.

The Tube Saturation effect is an interesting one. I've used a lot of these circuits from different companies over the years and I'm still looking for one that really stands out from the crowd. The SPL version is pretty good I must say, a little gives you that subtle hint of harmonic saturation and a lot gives you a more noticeable top end bleed with some pleasing bass enhancement thrown in. I actually used this effect mainly to enhance low-end material and thicken up the odd vocal. The way to get the saturation really kicking through the unit is to engage the +15dB button in the mic preamp section, and then ramp up gain via the pre and the compressor's make-up gain section. The effect can get pretty outrageous, and in a real rock 'n' roll kind of way too – perfect for more aggressive mixing effects among other things. Like the Air band EQ, a little of this can go a long way in general use so don't expect it to be the 'distortion knob' of your dreams. It's mainly there to augment the distortion options you've already got.

The Frontliner's metering really deserves special mention here too as it adds a definite touch of class to an already well-endowed unit. The VU meter is big, looks great and allows you to observe your signals in a variety of ways – very nice indeed. Oh, and did I mention you can custom order the 2800 with Lundahl input and output transformers if you want more 'iron' in your sound?

NITTY GRITTY EXAMPLES

Rather than go on and on in general terms about the Frontliner, I thought I'd give you some examples of where, from my perspective, the unit did its best work:

As a front-end for various singers through Neumann, Sennheiser and Bees Neez mics: high marks for the pre and compressor. Some subtle EQ tweaks helped deliver transparent, smooth results every time.

As a bass D.I.: more transparent and perhaps a little less funky than my UA 6176. Very useable straight off the bat with tone sculpting options galore!

As a room mic source via an Audio-Technica active ribbon mic: a little bit of gentle compression, a bit of cut in the Air band and a bit of low-mid lift; very nice, not too noisy.

As a mix signal path for double bass: great for controlling the dynamics and adding presence with the high-mid band EQ. A little bit of tube saturation also solidified the tone and glued the sound together nicely.

As a drum overhead source via a Neumann U87 mic: good solid tone, again the gentle settings on the compressor kept things nicely in check in louder sections.

As a mix signal path for a rather bright vocal recorded elsewhere: EQ helped control the brightness and I was able to slowly but surely transform this vocal from a hard, bright condenser sound into something more rounded and, dare I say it, 'retro' sounding. The tube saturation also came very in handy here.

As a top snare source via a Shure SM58 mic: lots of clean tone and the ability to control dynamics and overtones worked well.

I could go on but you get the picture. The Frontliner is a very nice piece of kit. It covers a lot of ground in terms of sonic creativity with the most important things like the mic pre and compressor sections done right. By the time it was whisked away by the higher powers at AT I'd decided the Frontliner was indeed a great box that could do a lot of things extremely well and I missed it almost immediately. (Damn. why don't they give me more crap stuff to review so I don't grow fond of it!). The 2800 has the flexibility to be a multiple tracking and mixing tool while remaining relatively straight-forward to use and, apart from a few minor gripes like the rear-mounted power switch and confusing legending, the unit is very well designed and presented. I never really doubted the Frontliner in my time with it, and having now mixed a diverse bunch of stuff that I'd tracked with it I'm very happy with the results. If you're in the market for a quality front-end channel strip the SPL 2800 Frontliner should definitely be on your audition list. ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price
\$2699

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Pros

Very good sound quality.
Offers great flexibility and versatility.
Tasty tone shaping options.
Comprehensive metering.
Custom I/O options available.

Cons

De-esser not so flash.
No dedicated bottom-end EQ.
Some controls hidden around the back.
Runs hot.

Summary

The Frontliner 2800 is a tasty unit with an excellent mic pre, sweet compressor plus scads of tone shaping options. It has the flexibility to be split into independent modules via rear patching or sub-grouped via a nifty internal router, but if you want to make full use of the individual modules, get the soldering iron ready for a mega patchbay session! The VU meter is fantastic, the Tube Saturation effect is cool and extra A/D converter and I/O transformer options can make this into one hefty box of tricks.