

Interview with Gov't Mule's Warren Haynes and Producer John Paterno

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Whitestone P331 EVL Tube Loading Amplifier

This tube-based mixing and mastering tool gets a tad evil

REVIEW BY PAUL VNUK JR.

In the September 2020 issue, mastering engineer Justin Perkins and I took a look at the P331 Tube Loading Amplifier from Whitestone Audio. Now, three years and one month later, it's time to review and revisit its evil twin, the P331 EVL.

Tubes Loaded

The original Whitestone P331 is the creation of mastering engineer Kim Rosen and her husband Dave. This 2U 19" rack box was initially designed to add extra tube and transformer-based "fairy dust" to Kim's mastering projects at Knack Mastering in Ringwood, New Jersey.

Déjà Vu

For all intents and purposes, the P331 and P331 EVL are the exact same box in design and function; only their looks and execution differ. As Dave Rosen tells me, the P331 EVL is just "less polite."

The P331 EVL is a 2U 19" rack device this time dressed in a gloss black enamel finish with a bronze-colored, embossed EVL badge. It is a two-channel affair (dual-mono or stereo), and each matching channel boasts four high-quality stepped rotary switches, five toggle switches and a large level-selectable VU meter. The controls are all digital and make use of 80 precision relays. No audio passes through any of the front panel controls.

You will find balanced XLR connections on the back.

Inside

Internally, the P331 EVL is a fully differential (balanced) Class-A tube amplifier using 6SN7 hi-fi vacuum tubes powered by a 320V DC 6x filtered high voltage plate/anode tube power supply, and custom wound transformers.

Loading

Each channel offers three analog sweetening options. Loading is all about the tube stage. Interestingly, turning the loading control does not push audio into the tube as one might assume; rather, it allows you to move the audio to different points on the tube's response curve, introducing non-linearities and varying amounts of second and/or third-order harmonics.

A specially designed Mode switch offers two loading styles—clean or bloom. Clean is a more subtle feedback design, while bloom is described as the less subtle feedforward mode.

Auto-Padding

A unique Auto-Padding circuit keeps the level the same as you push into the tube. As Justin pointed out in the initial review, "This allows you to really hear how the unit is affecting the sound and

not be distracted by the change in loudness." The P331 allows this padding to occur in the pre or post-tube stage.

You can also disable Auto-Padding and use the master Gain knob to attenuate or accentuate the results, much like a guitar amp stage or a classic tube mic pre. Nicely, as you toggle between Pre, Post and Open, the Open volume will not jump to its intended level until you turn the gain knob to the zero position. The corresponding status LED flashes blue to alert you to turn it down and turns solid when fully activated.

Justin originally mentioned that in mastering, he found little use for the fully open setting. I am the opposite and find it quite valuable in mixing, especially for processing individual instruments.

Lift

The Lift knob is a fixed parallel high/low EQ designed to enhance either the lows, the highs, or both at once. There is no control over the frequency choice, and as Justin mentioned, "It will either fit a track or it won't."

HF adds a touch of openness while LF can gently beef things up depending on the song. Most of the time, I preferred the gentle high-end dust of HF and never turned it off, but it's worth noting this is not an "air-EQ" substitute.

Transformed

Next in the chain is the XFORMER dial, which allows you to engage a custom output transformer and choose between two

different transformer loading modes. This is the most different of all the P331 EVL offerings and is designed to be a touch more heavy-handed than the original.

Setting 1 is the most traditional and console-like. It gently constrains the low-end while adding a bit of low, mid punch, upper mid tightening and a nice upper harmonic saturation.

Setting 2 just adds *more*. It's thicker, thumpier, more saturated and meatier—much more so than the original P331. If you want harmonic excitement, this is the setting.

Boost-Cut-Gain and More

The final control is a master solid-state output Gain. This stepped knob can boost or attenuate the output level +/- 11dB in 1db increments. A 3-position Resolution switch lets you back down or boost the signal in smaller 0.25dB or 0.5dB increments. This gain control can also be bypassed entirely. Speaking of bypass, each channel contains a master true-bypass control.

One final note: the unit can be placed in a handy stereo mode where the left side controls operate each channel simultaneously with the exception of the bypass switches.

In Use

When Justin reviewed the P331 as a mastering device, he noted its intended sonic subtleties and even its “element of unpredictability” where “You really have to experiment and see what settings are going to work on a given song.”

This aspect of the P331 has not changed, even despite its EVL monicker. The P331 EVL is still a mastering-grade piece designed to add successive elements of tube, tone and transformer subtlety. Even when pushed, the P331 EVL is not a distortion, grit or dirt box.

On my mixes, I found the Clean loading affected the poke of upper mid range a bit more with a gentle sparkly harmonic fuzz in the highs—again, not overdrive fuzz, just fuzzier.

Bloom is well named as it fills out the lows and low mids and warmly rounds the highs as it is pushed. Pushing deeply into Bloom yields what many of us would call a classic tube sound. On the two-bus, for the most part, I stuck with a post-tube bloom setting when I wanted the P331 EVL sound to be the most apparent and moved to full open when processing individual tracks.

Coming Soon

Although I was not able to try it, Dave Rosen let me know that Whitestone is working on adding full MIDI/Digital recall in your DAW via a plugin over USB or Ethernet, and current units can be retrofitted with this option—cost to be determined.

Final Thoughts

I was really glad to get a second go-round with the P331 EVL in my studio. It came at the perfect time as I was mixing both a live direct-to-digital concert performance from last year as well as a few of my songs crafted at home completely in the box with virtual instruments back in 2020/2021 during lockdown. As I said in my past review, this is a brilliant antisterility machine.

Not just for mastering, the Whitestone Audio P331 EVL is great for adding tube and transformer tones to refine your final mix. It's one of those boxes where you become aware of it more when you bypass it than when you are initially dialing it in. The P331 EVL is a very subtle flavor box designed in many cases to add the final yet essential 5-10% of polish to a piece. ➡

Price: \$5,699

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