

Tape OP GEAR ReV



Radial Engineering *PowerPre 500-series preamp*

If you have any open slots in your 500-series rack, the *PowerPre* should be on your shortlist of preamps to consider. Like other products from Radial Engineering, the build-quality is top-notch, and the design is all about no-nonsense functionality. Soundwise, it doesn't try to emulate the personalities of any of the vintage preamps that are discussed ad nauseam on the interwebs. Instead, it celebrates its own individuality by offering a carefully conceived set of controls that allows you to extract an expansive range of character from your recording chain. As a result, the *PowerPre* is not only an ideal preamp for a wide variety of tasks, but it's also eminently "stackable"; in other words, as long as you're careful not to overdo things, you can record many tracks through this preamp, and come mix time, you won't find yourself wallowing in an overabundance of any single flavor — or worse, too much mud.

The first control worth mentioning is the knob labeled Gain. Most preamps employ an attenuator here to control input sensitivity, which can lead to various signal-to-noise problems inherent to that design philosophy. The *PowerPre*'s Gain knob, on the other hand, turns two concentric potentiometers simultaneously, one each for input sensitivity and gain, maintaining a relationship between them that maximizes the signal-to-noise ratio no matter the knob's position. AccuState is Radial's trademark for this application. In practice, I found the *PowerPre* to be a very quiet preamp at all gain settings, whether I was using a hot condenser mic on a kick drum or a low-output passive ribbon on a quiet guitar.

The second control that merits discussion is the 3-position voicing switch labeled Vox. Its Breath position engages a smooth EQ curve that's not unlike a "tilt" function, affecting the whole frequency range to gently restrain some of the extreme lows while adding presence to the highs. Switching to Punch does the opposite by accentuating the lows while very subtly reigning back some of the highest harmonics. The middle position, labeled Linear, bypasses the Vox circuit. What makes Vox different than an outboard EQ patched in after the preamp, or a plug-in employed on the track once it's recorded? Good question. The answer is that the voicing circuit sits *before* the *PowerPre*'s Hammond output transformer, and this topology plays a big factor in the *PowerPre*'s individuality and expressiveness, as I'll try to explain.

It's difficult to give a baseline description of the *PowerPre*'s sound without falling into clichés. Yes it's clean. No it's not clinical. But it does lean toward the "warmth" end of the spectrum, without sounding at all dark or woolly. Moreover, with purposeful use of the AccuState gain control as well as the aforementioned voicing switch, you can stay clean or you can push the Hammond output transformer into various realms of saturation. Subsequently, snare drums can sound focused or crunchy; kick drums can smack hard or thud pillowy; electric guitars can chime high or chug low; vocals can be radio-smooth or in-your-face screechy. I am particularly impressed with how much I can change the character of both male and female voices, as well as emphasize or play down proximity effect. I also really like what the preamp can do on piano. For example, lightly overdriven using the Breath setting, the *PowerPre* can sweeten my Yamaha U3's tone while adding a delicately textured shimmer to its sustain. In contrast, with Punch engaged and the output transformer hit harder, the preamp adds density and urgency that an EQ alone would fail to do. Very cool. By the way, I've been using the *PowerPre* for almost a year, and I'm still impressed — and occasionally startled — by its versatility.

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