

RETRO STA-LEVEL

Re-issues are common as muck but this one's a beast.

Text: Calum Orr



▶ Retro (the company) has a 'replica' of the famous Gates STA-Level compressor on the market that's quite the sight for sore eyes. In the era of GUIs and pixels this compressor says *Step Aside!* On first impression you could be forgiven for thinking the unit once controlled a Panzer tank's gun turret rather than audio signals.

The Retro STA-Level is a mono tube compressor that does what most others merely claim to do; it compresses audio signals with a magnificent musicality and tone that leaves you amazed, and immediately wanting 10. It's the kind of unit that repeatedly inspires you to think, "I wonder what it sounds like on bass; I wonder what it does to drum rooms; I wonder how it works on electric guitars..." In short, it's a monster.

Though it's by no means a 'nut for nut' replica of the original Gates STA-Level, the Retro equivalent is by any measure every bit as good as the original. Its large array of tubes and hand-wired circuitry conspire to impart a creamy tube tone filled with even harmonic distortion that's simply stunning on digital vocal recordings and bass guitars in particular. It's just what the analogue doctor ordered for those overly dynamic lacklustre digital performances.

Originally created in 1956 by Gates, the first STA-Level design was based around the GE circuit of the day, and quickly became known for its great sound, even at slower release settings. I say 'even at slower release' because I typically find many compressors simply don't sound any good on slow release. Consequently, in the past, I've either resorted to backwards compression (a technique that Stav has popularised in the pages of this very mag), used several compressors in a daisy chain, or simply sped up my release settings. For me, this was the first thing that struck me about the Retro; it's capacity to sound good on slow release.

My initial experience of the Retro STA-Level involved a recent mix session where I had it strapped across the main vocal. This particular vocal had been recorded in a basement through an Audio-Technica 4033, with very little, if any compression. As soon as it was patched in this compressor started doing great things to the vocal tone. Immediately the voice seemed to be exuding more than its fair share of bottom-end – far more than the original recording possessed. In fact, I was having to roll out quite a bit of what I would call luxurious thick bottoms in the end.

The Gates STA-Level was, and still is, relatively famous for the VCA thump its design imparts on a signal (and no, that's not like a corky you get at the Victorian College of the Arts on your birthday). What it means is that your signal takes on a particularly authoritative stature, particularly in the low end. When I read recently that Sylvia Massy Shivy won a Grammy in 1997 for her work on Johnny Cash's *Unchained LP*, and that the vocal compressor for the whole record was an original

Gates STA level, that struck a chord with me. It's that kind of compressor that most certainly imparts a feeling of nostalgia and helps you believe the words being sung. Just to harp on about it a bit more, this compressor makes lead vocals sound like a record. Finished. Done. Sylvia describes the STA-Level as having a 'full, round, comfortably worn sound' – words equally befitting the Retro.

Of course, the new STA level has a few new tricks up its sleeve that set it apart from the original, like two NOS (new old stock) tubes rather than the original single 6386, which are now considered rarer than politicians with integrity. (There's also still a socket available for the 6386 tube, just in case you happen to have one). The completely hand-wired components are also quieter than the original's due to age and, of course, the better tolerances in today's components.

But the most significant difference between the Retro and the Gates is that the designers at Retro have taken it upon themselves to put some of the controls, which were once behind the hinged faceplate, on the front panel. These provide a range of release times rather than the fixed release time of the original, and all are within easy reach. Having control of the circuit topology selector without having to look under the bonnet is a great idea, although those obsessed with originality might be a little miffed by the physical differences between the two versions. Certainly, for simple ease of use, the Retro eats the original for breakfast.

The three-position Mode switch enables three different classic tube compression flavours: Single, which provides a single RC time constant for attack, typical of most tube compressors; Double which has a dual time constant that responds more musically to the incoming audio, and Triple, which utilises the dual-time constant with a fast attack like the famed Fairchild 660 and 670.

RETRO-PERSPECTIVE

As long-time repairers and modifiers of STA-Level compressors in the US, the folk at Retro have obviously decided to include features that most of their clients have been requesting for their original units. It's clever thinking to reproduce a classic with readily available tubes and frequently requested mods.

So I guess you can tell that I like (and require) the STA-Level! In fact, as with all great kit, I'd love two! And do you wanna know why? Well, while the STA-Level is undoubtedly king on voice, it's also killer on bass! The aforementioned VCA thump does wonders for any bass daring to wander meekly through its circuit, especially with 40dB of fat yet articulate gain reduction on hand.

Another reason to have two or more Retro STA-Levels would be for stereo mix bus compression. If you have the budget, get one! ■

NEED TO KNOW

Price

£4740

Contact

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Pros

Amazingly dense and luxurious tone.
More versatile than the original. Classic looks.
Well built.

Cons

Like the original, the VU meter can be wildly inaccurate.

Summary

There are countless reissues of classic analogue gear on the market, and plug-ins that 'model' analogue hardware are dime a baker's dozen, but very few produce a product that equals or arguably better the original. Similarities are often only skin deep, but Retro has clearly done its homework here.