

## You Should Experiment More



The MD7's high performance discrete transformer coupled preamp can do a lot more than just preamp.



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## Black Lion Audio

### B173 mkII preamp

Four years ago, Black Lion Audio introduced the B173 [Tape Op #100], their single-channel take on a British-style preamp at a wallet-friendly price. Last year, their B173 Quad improved on the design and assembled four B173s into a two space rack unit. Now, Black Lion Audio is offering an updated single preamp design in the original-sized half rack space housing, has slapped a "mkII" on the front, and we are all better for it! The B173 mkII now boasts Cinemag input and output transformers (the original had an EDCOR output transformer), with a revamped gain stage that's even quieter than their ultra-quiet first iteration. The black brushed-metal faceplate looks sharp, accented with bright white LEDs for a clean, minimalist look. From left to right you'll find the Power toggle, a large stepped input Gain pot, a 48V phantom power button, polarity button, a smaller Output Level attenuator pot, and a Hi-Z button with corresponding Hi-Z instrument input jack.

Anytime I see a new Neve 1073-style preamp pop up on the market, I feel anything but intrigue; it's no secret there are as many of these units as there are stars in the sky, but it's also important to take note when a company succeeds in offering a useful, high-quality tool at a decent price – especially for those of us in our bedrooms or basements. Black Lion Audio has done exactly this with the B173 mkII.

In use, I compared the B173 mkII with two other revered 1073-inspired preamps, and, given the ridiculously low price of Black Lion Audio's entry, I was pleasantly surprised. The B173 mkII didn't mirror either preamp across the entirety of its gain stage, but it did actually (and quite closely I might add) resemble one of them at low gain, and the other when driven. I would describe it this way: The B173 mkII succeeds in providing the silhouette of a Neve 1073 in that it's not identical, but from the corner of your eye you'd instantly recognize it as that old friend who's always been there for you (let's call him Rupert). The voicing is similar in all of the ways you'd think: Rich low end with present high mids, but offering a little more headroom and a bit more sparkle on top. This last point is key, as it could be a good thing or a bad thing depending on what you're going for, and why I described the B173 mkII as being a potentially useful tool in our insatiable sonic toolbox.

When I want something to sound "Neve-y", I usually don't also want it to sound modern. However, when I want something to sound modern, and I use a 1073-style preamp, I assume at some point in the chain I'll need to modernize the sound, whether via a little EQ sculpting, or maybe an aggressive Empirical Labs EL8X Distressor [#32] setting to make it react in a modern way. The B173 mkII, being both brighter and more open than my other two Neve options, provides that modern sparkle while still providing the impression of a 1073, which is definitely a tool I can use. On one hand, I'll lose a little bit of the fatness of a traditional Neve 1073, but I'll gain a little bit of clarity. If that means I can leave an EQ out of my chain, great! If I can crank the gain up without the high mids sounding squeezed I may lose a little bit of drive and push, but I'll also gain harmonics without becoming claustrophobic.

I felt it might be appropriate to A/B the B173 mkII translation on smaller speakers given how most folks are listening these days, and found it to translate better than the other two 1073-inspired pres in select instances. Bass and guitar DIs sounded more open and balanced without a need for extra top end; ribbon mics had just a touch more sparkle that could be helpful; Shure SM7Bs and other dark dynamic mics sounded a bit more refined and balanced versus the darker, meatier traditional 1073-style options. With brighter large-diaphragm condenser mics (as well as bright sources in general), I tended to prefer the more rounded top end of the other two preamps, as that's historically where they've buttered their biscuits. So, I can easily imagine a scenario where you're someone who's recording say, a Fender Stratocaster guitar DI'd, a Royer R-121 [Tape Op #19] ribbon mic on the guitar cabinet, and maybe a Shure SM7B for your voice, and you want to make internet content without dropping three thousand dollars on three Neve mic preamps. Well, the B173 mkII may be your ticket to a great sound right out of the box.

So, what's the catch? In order to make the B173 mkII land at the price point it has, there are a few design choices that may sour the faces of some professionals: There is no VU or LED for signal/peaking, the power supply is a wall wart instead of built into the chassis, and the output jack is balanced 1/4-inch instead of XLR. These minor gripes obviously don't affect functionality in any way, and for the price, I'm happy to overlook them, but they are things to note. Overall, the B173 mkII is definitely worth considering if you're after an updated 1073-like sound at a reasonable price point, or if you're simply a fan of Black Lion Audio's gear. (\$449 MSRP; [blacklionaudio.com](http://blacklionaudio.com))

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