

# Black Lion Audio Bluey

## Mono FET Compressor

Black Lion's Bluey recreates an 1176 that has made more hits than most!

NEIL ROGERS

Chris Lord-Alge, aka CLA, must be one of the most recognisable figures in the world of music production. His confident, concise mixing style has graced countless hit records, seen him win multiple Grammys and earned the respect of his peers. Something very important to CLA's 'sound' is his use of compression, and if you look at images of his Mix LA studio, you can't fail to notice his enviable selection of outboard compressors. Among these, he has several of the 'Blue Stripe' versions of the UA 1176 FET limiting amplifier. These 'Blue

### Black Lion Audio Bluey £975

#### PROS

- Excellent vocal and bass compressor.
- Subtle but pleasing mid-range bump.
- Good value.
- Solid build and feel.
- Wet/dry blend control.

#### CONS

- None.

#### SUMMARY

Black Lion Audio have created a solid, stylish-looking and great-sounding 1176-style compressor that allows us all to get a taste of Chris Lord-Alge's favourite vocal treatment.



Stripe' compressors were the earliest 'revisions' of the famous Universal Audio 1176 — head to UA's website for more detail on the different revisions: [www.uaudio.com/blog/1176-la2a-hard-ware-revision-history](http://www.uaudio.com/blog/1176-la2a-hard-ware-revision-history). CLA favours one particular unit, which he feels exhibits a little more 'mojo' than the others and which he estimates has been used on over 14,000 vocal recordings!

### Black And Bluey

CLA invited Black Lion Audio to investigate what, if anything, made this particular unit special from a technical point of view — and, more importantly, whether it could be recreated. The result of those investigations is Black Lion's Bluey. What Black Lion Audio's head designer Jesus noticed when he began to investigate this unit was that the various technicians who'd repaired or serviced it over the years hadn't always used exactly the 'correct' component values when a part needed replacing. Over 30-40 years, the cumulative effect of these tweaks has (probably accidentally) resulted in a 'modded' version of the original design, which Black Lion say exhibits a more mid-forward sound than a typical 1176, which is particularly well suited to CLA's style of mixing — and to how he likes to treat vocals, in particular.

If you're familiar with any 1176, there'll be no surprises here in terms of layout and operation, except for the welcome

addition of a wet/dry knob for instant parallel compression. There's no threshold control on an 1176, of course: gain reduction is achieved by adjusting the input level, and tweaking the output knob to compensate for the level changes. New users can be thrown by the fact that the attack and release controls on an 1176 work 'in reverse', with the fastest setting being with the knobs fully clockwise. The standard ratio options of 4:1, 8:1, 10:1 and 20:1 are here, as well the option of the famous 'all buttons in' trick, which involves pressing all four ratio buttons down together to achieve a distorted, heavily compressed effect.

### Compression Character

There are lots of 1176 clones and 'inspired by' units around now, and in contrast with some of those, I was pleasantly surprised when I got my hands on this one. It feels weighty, solid and very well put together indeed. From the knobs and switches to the chassis and the look of the VU meter, it all looks and feels very much like the real deal.

Obviously I can't say how closely Black Lion's Bluey matches the behaviour of the fabled unit it claims to recreate! Instead, then, I'll focus here on how the 'Bluey' sounds in its own right, and in comparison with 1176s more generally, and with my own 1176LN — a more recent, lower



Photo: Neil Reggan

## Alternatives

As well as **Universal Audio's 1176LN**, there are various 1176 clones and FET compressors that have evolved from that design, but few are based on the original 'Blue Stripe' revisions — and there are no others that purport to model CLA's favourite unit! Probably the closest alternative is a DIY kit by **Hairball Audio**, who, in case you don't have the skills, recommend people in the USA and Europe who can build the kit for you.



As well as the familiar 1176 controls, the front panel includes a wet/dry blend knob, for instant parallel compression (to mimic CLA's workflow), and the rear features a stereo link jack.

kHz area. It had a similar effect when used on a kick drum. I figured you might be interested in hearing for yourself how the Bluey compares to a more modern 1176, so I made some audio examples of some of these typical applications — you can find them on the *SOS* website at <https://sosm.ag/black-lion-bluey>.

## FET Accompli?

The 1176 has become a studio classic for good reasons. It can bring energy and thickness to vocals, and also allows you to manipulate the dynamic envelope — the sense of attack and release — on a whole range of sources. As I mentioned above, I have no idea how closely the Bluey recreates the original unit in CLA's studio, but as a useful audio tool in its own right — and especially considering how much it costs — it's a very good-sounding unit indeed.

I was very impressed with how the 'Bluey' performed throughout the review period, and the subtle mid-range 'bump' it imparts at, to my ears, around 2-3 kHz is what most sets it apart from my 1176LN. Also worth highlighting is that it can be transparent when used lightly but impart real character when you want it to. Add in the wet/dry mix control and you have a nice palette of compression options available from a single unit. I also found it a bit more 'forgiving' than my 1176LN as a tracking compressor, to the extent that I found having both options available in my rack to be very useful. Adding one of these to your outboard rack won't magically make you mix like CLA, of course, but if you've been looking to add an 1176-style compressor to your studio, this should be a very attractive option. **///**

noise revision of the original design that I've used a great deal over the years.

My first impression when I fed a vocal through the Bluey was that it seems to have a slightly more relaxed approach than a typical 1176, which is known for its super-fast attack and release times. Certainly, the VU meter reacts more slowly, and even with the attack at its fastest setting, the Bluey appeared to let through more of the very 'front' of a vocal. That's an observation, not a criticism: it sounds nice.

Something else I noticed straight away was that I had to really crank the input to introduce gain reduction. This wasn't an issue sound-wise, but I know from my own experience of using an 1176 that how hard you drive the output affects its tone, and it just felt a little unfamiliar compared with how I typically use my 1176LN. Black Lion explained that this is because they were keen for the unit to mimic very closely how Chris uses his unit as an insert on his SSL console. To this end, they've incorporated input and output buffers in the circuit to help users hit what they (and CLA) consider to be the 'sweet spot'.

I had the chance to use the Bluey on several different vocalists over the review period, and as a tracking compressor it always delivered very natural-sounding results when dialling in around 3-5 dB of gain reduction on the 4:1 ratio setting.

If anything, it seemed more transparent than a typical 1176 when used like this, subjectively feeling as though it didn't seem to clamp down so quickly on any sudden changes in dynamic. Things got a lot more fun, though, when I switched to using the Bluey as a hardware insert in the more controlled surroundings of a mixing session. Using the Bluey a bit more aggressively here seemed to reveal more of the mid-forward character I'd anticipated, and it definitely brought more excitement to a vocal performance. I also noticed, with one female vocal in particular, that the Bluey seemed to bring more of a saturated 'edge' to the sound than my 1176LN. Again, this wasn't a bad thing by any means — it added to the sense of excitement in a pleasing way. The wet/dry parallel option does what you'd expect, and dialling in some very heavy compression and then blending that with the uncompressed signal at about a 60:40 balance became a go-to setting for me with a number of vocalists.

As well as vocal duties, this is a great compressor for tracking bass guitar. I sometimes find an 1176 can thin a bass out a little, and if you're not careful it can clamp down on the attack somewhat, but the Bluey felt a little smoother, slower and not typically 1176-like in how it reacts to a bass, which is a good thing to my ears. As on my 1176LN, the 8:1 ratio seemed the best setting, with around 4-5 dB of gain reduction sounding largely transparent but with a useful lift in presence around the 2-3

**E** £975 including VAT.  
**T** SCV Distribution +44 (0)3301 222 500.  
**E** sales@scvdistribution.co.uk  
**W** www.scvdistribution.co.uk  
**W** www.blacklionaudio.com