



## Black Lion Audio PG-1 mkII power conditioner

Since setting up my mix studio in Portland, I've been a bit annoyed by the noise floor of my Ocean Way Pro2A monitors [Tape Op #116]. It wasn't until I saw an ad for Black Lion Audio's new PG-1 mkII power conditioner that I thought that perhaps it *wasn't* the monitors causing the buzz in the first place. Black Lion Audio claims this unit filters "an average of 99.7% of high-frequency noise" due to superior quality capacitors (Panasonic and Wima) than those commonly found in similarly priced power conditioners. Long story short, a PG-1 mkII is now racked up in my mixing desk, powering my monitors (and various other gear), and the noise is almost entirely inaudible. This power conditioner works exactly as promised and has a few other awesome features as well.

For starters, there are three types of grounded power outlets (eight total) on the back of the unit: two Analog Audio, four Digital Audio, and two High Current Audio. Each of these filtered outlets is meant to eliminate different types of noise from various gear (such as converters, active speakers, dynamics processors, etc.). The High Current filter is also timed to turn on six seconds after powering up and also turn off first when powering down. I leave my monitors "on" continually, then use the power conditioner to control power switching. With my speakers plugged into the PG-1 mkII's timed outlets, I've also eliminated the occasional power-up "snap" I used to get when using my old un-sequenced power conditioner. The front panel includes a lamp socket and a Dimmer knob, an LED monitor that displays real-time voltage status, a USB Type-A outlet that provides charging power for your (or your clients') devices, plus two filtered convenience grounded outlets that remain active even when the unit is shut down – brilliant for charging a laptop overnight or plugging in a guitar amp for practice without turning on the rest of the studio.

I love it when gear works well and solves previous problems. The PG-1 mkII power conditioner is simple but effective and has indisputably made my studio sound better. If you're experiencing RFI/EMI [radio frequency interference/electromagnetic interference] issues with gear or are simply looking for a reliable power conditioner for your studio, I highly recommend this product – it worked for me! ([blacklionaudio.com](http://blacklionaudio.com); \$299 street) -Gus Bery <[gusbery.com](mailto:gusbery.com)>

## Cloud Microphones

### 44 Passive ribbon mic w/ Cloudlifter

In my mind, microphones are much like colors on a painter's palette or a chef's ingredients. Each one has its own specific flavor that can be useful and powerful in the proper context. Ribbon mics are generally known to exude a lot of character, and Cloud Microphones' 44 Passive certainly possesses a unique personality reminiscent of the sounds from the early days of recording. Upon first inspection, I noticed the mic's sleek black look and lightweight feel. The lightweight nature is attractive because it makes it much easier to place than other heavy ribbon mics. It comes in a soft velvet storage bag with a simple, easy-to-use mount that swivels between vertical and horizontal. Also included is the Cloudlifter CL-1 [Tape Op #85] Mic Activator (in midnight black finish to match the mic), which boosts the impedance, allowing the Cloud 44 Passive to behave like an active ribbon mic. Overall, the austere, all-black presentation is pretty cool looking, and I was excited to hear how it sounds.

Whenever I evaluate a microphone I have never heard, I like to put up another mic that is of the same species with which I am very familiar. The ribbon mic I use most frequently is a Coles 4038 [Tape Op #15], so I chose that for my comparison. I should note that the Cloud 44 Passive is going for a different sound. However, for my purposes, I wanted something I know well as a benchmark, and the 4038 fits that bill. I started by putting each mic into a vintage API 312 preamp and matching the gain to record an acoustic guitar. Without the Cloudlifter, the 44 Passive is a few dB lower in gain than the Coles but has very low noise for a passive ribbon mic. On acoustic guitar, the 44 Passive sounded more open and midrange-y, while the Coles is quite bass-y and wooly. I could tell right away that these were very different mics and probably not all that comparable. The 44 Passive has a midrange-focused sound that gives off an "old-timey" vibe. Cloud calls it a "1930s-era ribbon sound," and I could hear that immediately. Moving on to vocals, the 44 Passive had presence and cut through while the Coles sounded big, warm, yet less clear. At this point, I thought that these two mics could actually be a nice complement to one another. They do very different things in the spectrum of heavy-handed colorfulness. I also tested the 44 Passive on drums, percussion, and electric guitar. The mic can handle high SPLs with no problem. I can definitely say the 44 Passive has its own unique sound that allows sources to cut through a mix without becoming too large.

The Cloudlifter CL-1 Mic Activator is an excellent addition to the package that is handy when recording quieter sources. It utilizes a direct-coupled, Class A circuit to provide 25 dB of quiet, transparent gain, and can also be used with other low output mics. I found the CL-1 to be quite useful with the 44 Passive and also with my Shure SM7 when recording vocals. I could hear no noticeable coloration to the sound when using it with either microphone, and the noise floor was not compromised at all.

Overall, the Cloud 44 Passive has a distinctive sound that could be a nice complement to mic collections already endowed with classic ribbon microphones, or to engineers seeking an old-school 1930s vibe. Its throwback sound is a color that has the potential to be very useful in a wide variety of applications. ([cloudmicrophones.com](http://cloudmicrophones.com); \$1499 street)

-Anthony Gravino <[anthonygravino.com](mailto:anthonygravino.com)>

## Universal Audio

### Hitsville EQ Collection plug-ins

With the introduction of UAD Spark, Universal Audio's new subscription-based native plug-in collection, longtime UAD users (like myself) now have access to a subset of our existing go-to UAD DSP-powered plug-ins available "on the go," so to speak. Among other benefits, I have the luxury of freeing up DSP resources on my Apollo [Tape Op #140] interface when mixing. These Spark iterations of the UAD plug-ins, such as the UA 1176 or Teletronix LA-2A Collection, are identical to their DSP-powered counterparts: this can be validated via null testing. And, if you have an M1-powered Mac, they run natively on Apple Silicon (PC support coming this fall). So, all is good with the world and your wallet, right?

Along comes the good ol' Gear Acquisition Gremlin (inevitably) with something new for both Spark and UAD users: UA's superb emulation of the unobtainium Motown classic seven-band EQ units, initially installed in the famous Hitsville U.S.A. Motown studios in Detroit and L.A. Two EQ models are included in the UA Hitsville EQ Collection purchase: the Studio Equalizer single-channel model and the passive Stereo Disk Mastering Equalizer. When I say "unobtainium," this is not hyperbole: only 46 of the Studio EQ units were produced some 60 years ago – and *only six* of the Mastering EQ units were ever built and installed. Of those six, UA found what they believe to be the only still-functioning Hitsville Mastering EQ, which was the basis for their end-to-end emulation. We live in a world of wonders and should be grateful every day.

Installation and update management for the Spark version we tested is handled exclusively through the slick new UA Connect app that works with your iLok registration (cloud-based or physical key). The interface is super-intuitive, with a dip/peak of  $\pm 8$  dB of gain in 1 dB stepped increments per each of the seven fixed frequency bands. There are some workflow enhancements here that should be lauded. I love the new tagging system in the UA Spark preset browser, and the "hidden" interface shortcuts to display a variety of session-friendly UX elements written on the front panel in virtual grease pencil. Hopefully, a similar preset browser finds its way into the UAD neighborhood; it's quite satisfying.

The In, Out, and Off switch is essentially what you'd expect: it affects whether the EQ processing is applied to your signal, duh. Setting the control to Out instead of Off bypasses the EQ section. However, your signal still passes through the modeled transformer and op-amp emulation to take advantage of all those lovely non-linearities. Especially when driving the input into the plug-in – the Hitsville can take a surprising amount of input gain and distorts quite nicely (results may vary; proceed at your own risk).

I found the Mastering EQ plug-in confidently at home on subgroups and buses, and the included mid/side feature (the one element *not* present on the original hardware) is especially welcome on my master bus, where it can add substance, grit, and width. The low/high/band-pass filters are fixed values (70 Hz high-pass, 15 kHz low-pass, and a combined 70 Hz and 15 kHz band-pass) and were originally found in the Hitsville cutting lathe to help shave off unneeded frequencies in the Motown mastering stage while carving those super punchy and hot lacquers. The filters are interesting – they are very steep (especially at 15 kHz) but not surgical, and can really help tighten up subgroups in a pleasing way. I found the band-pass surprisingly helpful, and that filter