

GRACE DESIGN MODEL 101 MICROPHONE PREAMPLIFIER

by Martin Chittum

After building a formidable reputation with their Model 801 and 201 (8 and 2-channel, respectively) preamps, Grace Design now offers their venerable design in a single-channel that's priced for the more modest budgets of home and project studios. It features balanced I/O, using both XLR and TRS 1/4" jacks, "Ultra Clean" phantom power, a 75 Hz 12 dB/octave high-pass filter, 10 dB pad, multicolor LED peak meter, a high-impedance 1/4" input for guitars and such, and an 11 position rotary gain switch that uses precision silver contacts.

I tried the unit out with several different mics, and I was very pleased with its performance across the board. One of the greatest things about this pre is its ability to step out of the way and let you really hear what your mics sound like. It is undoubtedly one of the most uncolored pres I've ever used. The quality really showed through with those mics that already had a lot of color of their own, like my Reslo RBL ribbons and the good 'ole beat-to-death SM57s. The super-low noise specs are impressive too, and it really made a difference when I was using a ribbon mic, sometimes I had to use as much as 60 dB of gain (which is the max the stock unit will do) to get the signal I needed with some quiet sources, and the 101 gladly obliged, amplifying the signal with almost no audible noise added.

With condenser mics, like the CAD E300, the sound was no less outstanding. With vocals it was clear, detailed, and warm - all those qualities you would expect from a well-built piece of gear. I really enjoyed it with the E300 as a mono drum overhead (one of my favorite setups), the high SPL handling of the E300 coupled with the wide dynamic range of the 101 made for a drum sound that had some real power behind it. It almost sounded too loud, like the crash cymbals might start distorting it at any moment... but it didn't. Fucking beautiful.

The peak LED seems a little spartan at first, but you get used to it really quick. It lights green at -20 dB and turns red at +16 dB (10 dB below clipping) so you can set it at a good level and not freak out if it flashes red every once in a while because you still have decent headroom at that point. I only heard the unit distort once, and that was when a clumsy guitarist accidentally kicked the bass amp mic across the room (thanks Derric!).

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I just had to see how the hi-Z input sounded with a guitar - not just some clean direct guitar thing, but with a real guitar amp at real volume. So, I plugged straight into the power amp (bypassing the regular guitar inputs and tone controls via a special jack) of my modified Fender Dual Showman head, plugged my pedal board into the 101 and let 'er rip. I was surprised to find that I was able to get more volume out of the amp than usual, no doubt because of the 101's much higher headroom. I was able to push the tube power amp into some totally fat and glorious overdrive that made me completely forget that I didn't have any EQ to work with. And of course, the 101 stayed totally clean and pure, letting my natural guitar (and unnatural pedal) tones come through unadulterated. I really didn't care for the wall-wart power supply, something this nice deserves better, but performance didn't seem to suffer any. Also, the output sometimes seemed a little anemic for +4 dBu, I found myself occasionally flipping the inputs on my recorder to -10 so I wouldn't have to use as much gain.

Overall, I would rate the Grace Design Model 101 up there with some of the best. The extended dynamic range and incredible bandwidth (-3 dB at 400 kHz!) are much more than just fancy specs when you actually hear the beauty of this thing, and it really puts the rest of your gear under the microscope. Mics you always thought to be good sound even better, and maybe ones you were less impressed with suddenly have a colorful new personality that was covered up before by a lesser preamp.

At a list price of \$699, it's a little pricey compared to most budget single-channel pres currently on the market, but there is a remarkable difference in the quality between the 101 and pretty much anything else considered "affordable". If you need several channels, and you're willing to spend about \$4000, I would recommend checking out their 8-channel Model 801 because it'll actually cost you less than buying 8 Model 101s separately.

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