# Neve 88R LB

## 500-series Mic Preamp

**The preamp from Neve's "ultimate analogue console" is now available 'to go'...**

MATT HOUGHTON

In recent years, Neve have started to make available stand-alone modules in the 500-series API 'lunchbox' format. Perhaps most famous for their stunningly good 1073 preamp and equaliser, and the 2254A discrete compressor-limiter in this form, the Neve 88R LB can be released into the 500-series units as the 88RS 3 mic preamp. As the name implies, this is the same preamp as that employed in the 88RS console, which was launched in 2011 and is described by Neve as "the ultimate analogue console". Although it's often tempting to dismiss such developments from manufacturers as marketing exercises, Neve can point to a very high reputation built on countless quotes from a star-studded list of engineers and producers, all of which are welcome to their own opinions.

### Overview

While the module is generally of very high quality with top-class components used throughout the audio circuitry, the controls do seem a little less 'solid' than those of the 1073LB which was also in my Lunchbox rack during the review period, with a little more 'play' on the gain control than I was expecting. This isn't a new thing as I became accustomed to the 88RS console — and, in all honesty, it has no effect on the sound — but it's worth considering the module's physical construction in case you're very fussy about the feel of your gear. Rather than the case-with-chassis construction found in many 500-series modules, the 88R LB is built around a single PCB, with the front panel and rear connectors soldered directly to the board. This is a very neat and compact way of building a module, and it's also very robust, but it does mean that the board is relatively large and so may not fit in some 500-series racks. Fortunately, the board is small enough to fit in a standard 500-series rack, but it's worth checking before you buy if you're using a non-standard rack.




**Neve 88R LB £714**

**PROS**

- Clean, quiet mic preamp.
- Plenty of gain.
- All-discrete construction.
- Line input can be switched to bypass the transformer.

**CONS**

- Control knobs feel a little flimsier than on some Neve units.

**SUMMARY**

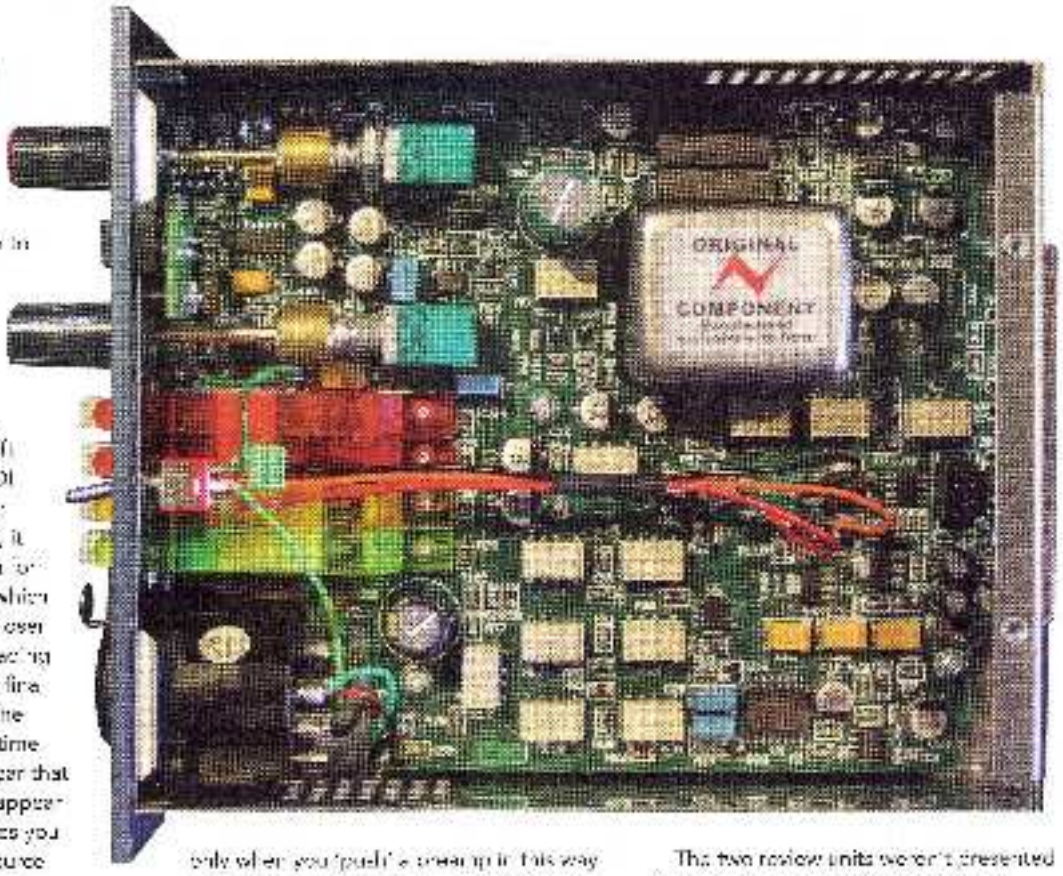
A successful port of the preamp from Neve's 88RS console to the 500-series format.

The knobs double up as push-buttons and the long axle extends back up into some way inside the module. As is common dual-concentric pots, such as one might find in a guitar amp for example, the 'business end' that connects to the circuit board is diminutive enough that it can easily be accommodated on a crowded circuit board in a 500-series case.

When it comes to comparing mic preamps, the most important factors are the technical and subjective sonic quality, and the functionality on offer — and in each of these respects, the 88R LB is likely to make you very happy indeed, as there's everything you need here from a mic preamp, and a little more besides.

Besides setting the mic gain (variable in 1dB steps through a 70dB range), the front panel has Mic, Line and DI input selection, with your current choice selected by an LED located between the knob/button. There's up to 70dB of gain available, which should be plenty for all but the most demanding of passive ribbon mics. Beneath the gain control, the high-pass filter knob is used to select the filter's turnover frequency, and the filter itself is switched in or bypassed by depressing the knob/button.

Four simple white push-buttons allow the user to switch +48V phantom power on/off, engage a 20dB pad, invert the polarity of the signal and select the front-panel input, which is presented as a Neutrik Combo socket beneath the buttons, and can accept mic, line or DI sources. The phantom power has been implemented in a thoughtful way: you can only activate phantom when a mic




Visible here are the pair of dual function push-button/knobs and custom input transformer.

input is present and selected, and if you change the source selection to line or DI, the phantom power is automatically deactivated, making it very difficult to accidentally 'fry' what you plug in!

Other than the ground-lift toggle for the unbalanced DI input, there's only one other control, marked 'REG'. This, it turns out, is an abbreviation for the word 'Regeneration'... which may or may not bring you closer to guessing its function! Reading the preliminary manual (the final version wasn't available at the time, but should be by the time you read this), it became clear that this feature, which doesn't appear on the 88RS console, enables you to route a DI or line level source through the input transformer, and that the blue LED embedded in the button lights when this feature is selected.

## The Sound Of Neve

I'm struggling to find much to say about the sound of this preamp, other than that it's everything I'd expected, given the design's heritage, and that the sonic quality is very good. It's a 'cleaner' sort of sound than you'll get from the 1073 (a good thing, in my book), albeit one with the characteristic transformer-ish Neve 'colour' about it, and one with less audible noise than in the older design. Unlike the 1073, the 68R LD doesn't give you the option of driving the input gain hard, in search of 'tone', and then passing it at the output level to taste. I wish more preamps would offer this feature, as it's only when you 'push' a preamp in this way that it begins to make a really significant sonic contribution. However, it's perfectly possible to use any mic preamp with a passive attenuator in series before your A-D converters — so that's what I did. To my ears, the overdriven character of the 68R LD is rather different from that of the 1073, sounding much brighter, tighter and more focused. Whether you prefer that sound is entirely a question of personal taste, but I can see applications for both sources in my own music, for example.

The Regeneration function is a very nice touch indeed, as it makes it easy for you to add a little 'analogue warmth' to individual sources, or even to entire mixes if you're so inclined. One pair of these preamps I used a Drake audio analyser to compare the effects of the standard and Regeneration functions on a line-level source. In most respects, the figures were very similar, although the Regeneration routing resulted in a slight but noticeable roll-off in the top end, and a tiny bit at the bottom, too.

The two review units weren't presented as a 'matched pair', but there was no discernible difference between them. The Regeneration function also brings some flexibility for recording, as it enables you to send a class DI or line signal while tracking, leaving the choice of adding the warmth later, if you can't feel able to commit to that decision at the time. You might prefer to make the decision, but it's nice to have the option.

## Verdict

**"This is a typically high-quality preamp from Neve, and one that offers a little more functionality than most."**

All in all, then, this is a typically high-quality preamp from Neve, and one that offers a little more functionality than most. Given its superb sound and versatility, and the dual functionality of the push button/knobs, I find it easy to forgive the slight fiddliness of the controls that I described earlier. While it's not exactly cheap, it's certainly a lot cheaper than buying the full console — and as well as being a good preamp in its own right, it could prove to be the perfect complement to JAD's Neve-endorsed plug-in versions of the Neve 88RS channel strip. ■■■

### Alternatives

There are now countless mic preamps available for the 500 series, and we always seem to have to be mindful of both cost and functionality.

£ £714 inc VAT (with 500 series module)
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