

cord jack, a balanced male XLR line output, and a female XLR mic input. Robbie is always ready to go—even when the unit is powered down, the tube stays on and warmed up.

Following in the footsteps of its microphone line, Blue designed Robbie as a Class A discrete tube preamp, featuring an 8 dB to 68 dB gain structure and a 10 Hz to 100 kHz frequency response—which means it should handle most any microphone in your cabinet.

I was excited to get Robbie into the studio for two reasons: one, I have come to expect high quality from Blue and couldn't wait to try it out, and two, because Robbie looks pretty freakin' cool. So does Robbie sound as good as it looks?

#### Robbie on the jobbie

In my studio, I compared Robbie to both a high-end solid-state and a similarly priced tube pre, with a variety of micro-

phones, and found Robbie to contain elements of each. Robbie delivered a signal which was very clean and strong like the solid-state preamp's, but less clinical. Robbie does have a tube presence to it, but unlike what you might expect, its warmth and coloration are very understated.

Tube mic preamps have built up a reputation for being warm, rich and thick with tone—Robbie is not one of those tube preamps. Robbie is really more a tube pre that thinks it's solid-state. If you are in need of a heavily-colored vintage sound, you will find Robbie to be much too subtle.

First I tried Robbie on some choral vocals, with a vintage-style FET mic, and I was very impressed—Robbie captured the vocals with much presence and a low noise floor.

I had a folk/blues session a few days later and tried Robbie on both vocals and acoustic guitar. Typically I never use tube pre on acoustic guitar as I find they obscure the sound too much, but I actually liked Robbie in this instance, especially on the rhythm guitar parts when

# BLUE Robbie the Mic Pre

## Distinctive looks and equally distinctive sound

Let me introduce to you the newest member of the Blue Family, "Robbie the Mic Pre".

Blue has a reputation for designing some of the most distinct looking and unique sounding microphones in the industry. Robbie is Blue's first departure from that and its first foray into a new product line.

#### Reto-Future

Weighing in at 7 lbs. and measuring 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ " L x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ " W x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ " H, Robbie looks like a gizmo from an old sci-fi movie, and of course (wink, wink) any similarities between Robbie the Mic Pre and *Forbidden Planet's* Robbie the Robot are purely coincidental. Robbie is somewhat oval shaped and sits on a round chrome base. Although Robbie is a desktop unit, according to Blue,

one to two Robbies can be rackmounted on an optional rack plate.

Robbie's grayish/silver faceplate is symmetrically balanced by two large round objects. On the left is a large plastic spring-loaded dome covering an ECC88 vacuum tube, centered inside of a styled chrome grating. On the right is a single large gain control knob surrounded by 11 (yes, it goes to eleven) blue LED lights. As you turn the gain knob from quiet to loud, the LEDs get brighter when the optimum gain level is reached and then dim again. [BLUE reports this feature has been removed from later Robbies, as users misinterpret the changing brightness as a defective LED. Apparently no one reads manuals.—Ed.] In the center of the faceplate is a single  $\frac{1}{4}$ " high-impedance input jack, for when Robbie is used as a DI/instrument preamp.

On Robbie's backside are 4 mini push button switches. From left to right they are a +48 V phantom power switch, an input selector (mic / instrument) switch, a -20 dB pad switch, and a polarity reversal switch. Below those are the power switch, an AC

blended in the mix. On the Robbie tracks there was a warm character, but it never became overbearing. Robbie also excelled on male vocals.

Robbie worked well on a variety of instruments and had absolutely no problems handling any mic I ran through it, from AT 40-Series mics to a Shure SM57.

Robbie does a good job of sonically taking the "edge off" any signal passed through it. In most instances I found this to be really nice; however, on sources such as cymbals, distorted electric guitar, or even some vocalists where "edge and bite" are essential, Robbie would not be my first choice in a mic pre.

#### Robbie the DI

Robbie also works as an instrument DI. Most of the time I find direct-injected bass to be quite lifeless,

great results running Robbie's gain knob between the 12 o'clock and 3 o'clock positions, remembering that the dial lights up as it senses the optimum gain level.

#### Inviting Robbie to stay

Other than the fact that I could not overdrive it, I only had two small gripes. The gain knob did have some rude crackle to it when turned, so I had to be careful to not adjust the gain while tracking. [BLUE reports this was a flaw on some early Robbies and has been fixed with a new potentiometer design on new units.—Ed.] And while I love Robbie's look and design, be warned—without the rackmount option, Robbie is one of those love-them/hate-them desktop units. I might worry about someone tripping over a mic cord and pulling Robbie from its perch.



requiring drastic eq to bring it into shape. Through Robbie, however, my Fender Jazz bass sat nicely in the mix and required very little post eq compared to what I usually record. On direct electric guitar, Robbie is very much style-dependent (see what I said above about 'edge').

I also tried Robbie as a DI on a vintage '73 Fender Rhodes. On quiet passages Robbie gave the Rhodes a nice roundness which it did not have when going straight into my mixer, but I was disappointed that I could not get Robbie to overdrive the piano (such overdrive is typical with tube pres and desirable on electric pianos). In fact, I could not get Robbie to distort period!

Robbie had headroom and then some. Even with the pad on, the inputs on my mixer clipped long before I could get any drive out of Robbie. Most of the time I achieved

With a street price of around \$1000 Robbie is a serious investment for a single-channel mic pre, and would probably not be the first mic pre you purchase. Like microphones, preamps offer different flavors from which to choose; Robbie is neither Vanilla nor Dark Chocolate, but if a flavor exists in between the two, Robbie just may be it.

If you are interested in adding a microphone preamp of subtle color to your studio, solid or tube, definitely give Robbie a try; you might just adopt him. ☺

**Price:** \$1299

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