



Review of Rascal Audio's *Analogue ToneBuss*  
by Thom Monahan, (Tape Op, May/June 2009)

Switching between in-the-box mixing, external summing, and console mixing has been a project by project reality in my personal world for a long time now. There are merits to all of these different approaches; my personal preference is to mix on a console, but it's not always an option. I've had great success using summing amps at home, but it's really not the same. It seems that summing amp design trends have been for them to sound quite neutral which can be an absolutely fantastic thing, but this is really different than picking the type of console to mix on, where choice is based on desired coloration.



Rascal Audio's *Analogue ToneBuss*

The *Analogue ToneBuss* by Rascal Audio, a company based in Dallas, TX, is the first product for Joel Cameron, a producer engineer and certifiable tone freak. Initially developed for himself, the *ToneBuss* is a deceptively simple 16 channel summing amp. Single-mindedly designed for useful and desirable harmonic distortion, I really love this box. It's colored, but the coloration is really musical and is amazingly reminiscent of the kinds of consoles that I love to mix on. It's like cooking on a kick-ass seasoned grill, with just the right amount of salt – and maybe even some bacon fat. A bit of old MCI, mixed in with a whole lot of Neve midrange, and maybe even a little dash of API top end. It's wonderful sounding and entirely addictive.

Outside of it's battleship grey/blue paint job that lets you know where it's coming from immediately, it's an unassuming 2ru high, all-business piece of gear that does nothing to call attention to itself. The front panel has only five rotary switches; the first pans inputs 1 and 2 directly to center position and the second does the same to inputs 3 and 4. The next two flip inputs 5 and 6 to a "direct" though that allows you to bypass the unit completely. This is a little odd as one would imagine that having this function would make more sense on inputs 1 and 2 as these are the default stereo outputs for just about every DAW based program, but Joel told me that this feature was added as a request from an early user and was an afterthought. After the first 50 units it seems that the direct outputs option will be switched to inputs 1/2. The last knob is a four position attenuator that drops the output by 2 dB each click (6 dB total). That proved to be extremely useful as it's easy to run the *ToneBuss*, really, really hot and it can be a bit much for the next unit in line. The back is Spartan with DB-25 connectors for each set of eight inputs (the review unit had 16 inputs, but a 24 input unit is also available), and a single DB-25 that handles the main, direct, and monitor outputs. It's not a ton of features, but it's just enough. With all the amazing monitoring routers out there, do you really need a summing amp with an iPod input?

(continued)

Review of Rascal Audio's *Analogue ToneBuss*

by Thom Monahan, (Tape Op, May/June 2009)

Based on a love of Class A Neve designs, the guts of the device are the custom wound transformers that were picked by ear for their saturation characteristics. One of the things that I really like about the *ToneBuss* is the way it compresses as the level of the program material increases. Just like a console, there's a definite but wide "sweet spot" where this box just sings. Talking to Joel, he said that this was a deliberate design goal and that you can easily pick up a couple of dB of volume just by hitting the *ToneBuss* a little harder than you might initially think. With no meters, you really need to use your ears, but you can really hear it. With electronic material, especially with TR-808s and sub-basses, the low end occasionally starts to lose focus and roll off a bit if you're really pounding the inputs. But it sounds so good everywhere else frequency wise, it is a bit easy to go too far pushing this compression aspect. Keeping an eye on your lows helps define where the sweet spot ends. It's the only drawback I can think of. Well, there's one more, but it's minor. I do have to say that the blue LED over the power switch on the front panel is a bit penetrating! But I've heard that's changing in later versions.

After installing the *ToneBuss*, mixing felt much easier here at my home studio. Tracks just seemed to fall into place without as much effort and my mixes here at home have been translating better when breaking them out later onto other desks. The real telling moment was where I had to beat a rough mix done at Electric Lady in NYC with the tracks broken out on one of their consoles. I can easily say I never would have been able to pull it off without the *ToneBuss*. I had raw tracks but they had been doing EQ here and there; the difference between the two was pretty dramatic. Using EQ in Pro Tools, I got close, and then I just kept raising the level of the mix up into the *ToneBuss*, dropping the output attenuator to keep the same amount of level into the mix compressors and everything just kept sounding better and better. The mix knit itself together really quickly once I got into the sweet spot. And this just seemed to be the normal course of events using the *ToneBuss* for the couple of months it's been here.

While summing amps in general immediately relieve the bottleneck of in-the-box mixing by allowing easier gain staging, the distinct coloration of the *ToneBuss* goes much further. Rather than just helping to break mixing logjams, the *ToneBuss* really seems to help sounds relate to one another. This is the main factor that makes it feel like a "console" to me. More than one person at my studio commented while A/B'ing the *ToneBuss*, "it sounds like a record!" And it really does. There's a distinct lift to the mid range and the low end just tightens up in a lovely, familiar way.

The *ToneBuss* provides loads and loads of what so many of us are looking for – musical harmonic distortion and that ineffable magic of a great mix bus. I don't know about you, but I'd love to install a console; unfortunately, I can't really afford one – price-wise, space-wise or time-wise. The *ToneBuss* offers a summing amp solution that has the closest thing to the feel of the types of consoles I like, minus the maintenance that goes along with an older desk. I'm looking forward to whatever Joel Cameron designs next.