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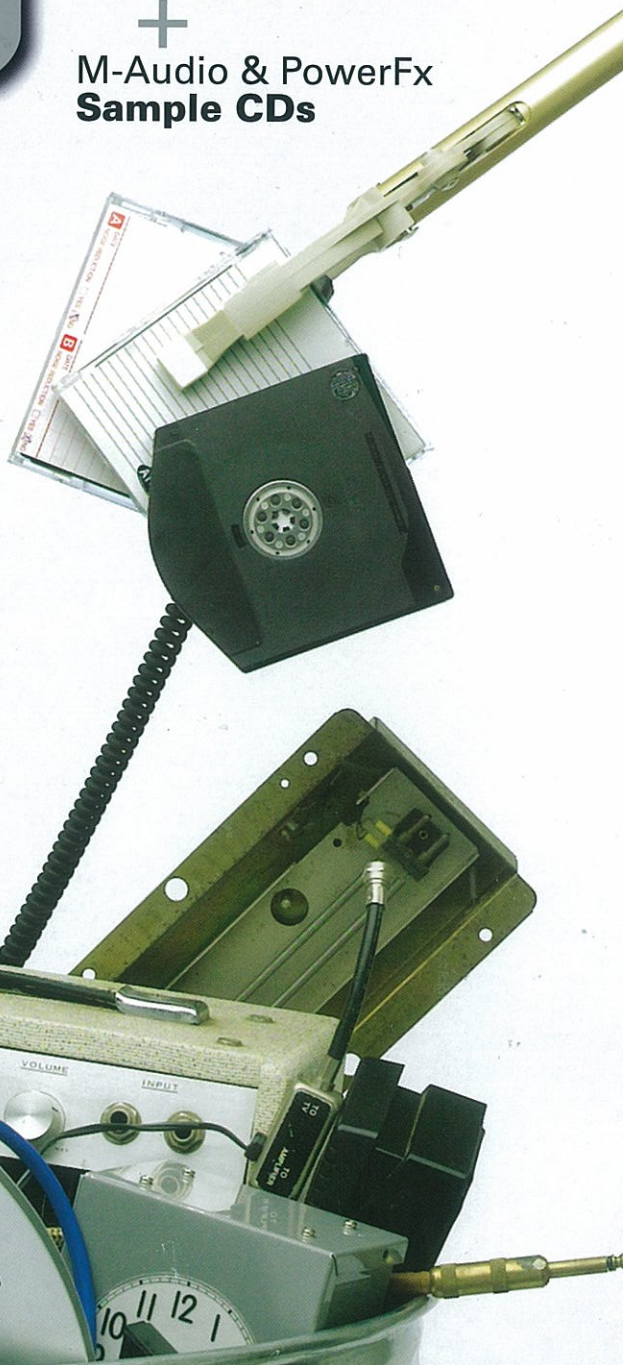
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# MANLEY LABS TNT

## Exclusive preview of one very different box

by Glenn Bucci

When Manley introduced the Slam! (a stereo limiter/two channel tube pre combo) a few years back, many raved about how amazing it sounded: It had tons of gain, yet offered a very smooth sound. Unfortunately, the price tag kept the piece out of many a salivating studio hound's hands, and many of us were left crying out to the gods, "why can't Manley just come with a single Slam! pre minus the compressor so we can actually afford one?" And while those poor chaps sat lusting out of their price range, those of us that had been so blessed also wanted some extra features out of the Slam! — namely, variable impedance control and a composite channel, British console-inspired pre for added flexibility.

So Hutch, Manley's chief designer, hid away in his laboratory, slaving over what would soon become Manley's newest outboard offering. Although *EQ* normally doesn't review prototypes, when something is a product is this close to production and of such interest to our readership, we couldn't resist. This two-channel, half-tube/half-solid state TNT mic pre marries the celebrated Slam! sound with the classic discrete character of the "No Tubes" design — at under half the price of the aforementioned product.

### OVERVIEW

The TNT is a heavy-duty 1U rackmount, split into two very different channels — with the left side being the Slam! tube pre and the right being a brand new solid-state pre. A toggle switch does power on/off, while input/output overload levels are clearly represented by two sets of LEDs (green for normal, red for overload). The Tube Channel includes a phantom power toggle switch that enables a full +48V, phase button that reverses the polarity 180°, low cut filter switch (flat or 80Hz), three-position toggle that chooses the input impedance (600 Ohm, 2400k, and 10k), unbalanced



instrument jack that disables the XLR when in use, gain knob that peaks at 70dB (perfect for ribbons or other mics that need a lot of gain), and a trim control that runs from 10 to +10.

The solid-state channel (Cool Channel) sports a similar layout. However, the filter options come in at 60Hz and 120Hz, as well as flat (options the tube channel unfortunately lacks). The impedance control on the solid-state side is a five-way rotary switch with settings from 300 Ohms to 2 Megohms. The Cool Channel also offers two exciting features new to Manley: an Iron knob that goes from -1 to +3 and a Color toggle switch that allows you to choose from Clean (normal state — very low noise/high accuracy), "70s," or "60s" (both of which are much more colorful). Cool channel, indeed.

Flipping the unit around, there are XLR ins and outs for each channel, as well as a 1/4" unbalanced output jack. On the Cool Channel, the 1/4" can be used with +4 or -10, while the tube pre has a +4 unbalanced output. And if you rip the unit open (we love to do that!), you can see that the sealed relays were placed on the circuit board to allow for the shortest possible signal traces.

According to Manley Labs, the final version of the TNT will offer additional DIP switches for added color — taking the total harmonic distortion of 0.03% to about 0.3%. There will also be a secondary switch that will produce a similar amount of distortion, biasing an output transformer to give more low frequency distortion (or "warmth"). Furthermore, the ability to add a clipper after the first tube stage, so the user can overdrive the pre by turning up the input, will be offered and on the Cool Channel, the Iron knob will be updated for added character as well.

### APPLYING THE TNT

Each channel/pre of the TNT has its very own distinct personality, with the Tube Channel sounding very warm and the Cool Channel being very clean, detailed, and musical. Thanks to the range of control offered by the TNT you, however, are not merely stuck with one sound or the other — a middle ground is readily available by just playing with the settings a bit. And this is good, as there is no such thing as a "silver bullet" pre: Different sources demand different treatments. And the TNT's ability to shape the sound it's receiving, from barely to dramatically, is exactly why it excels as being a great "go-to" pre.

The Cool Channel offers a very clean, almost "three-dimensional" type of sound that's both smooth and subtle. I found that, when working with a solid-state mic, the Cool Channel was my best bet — but that was in the context of working with a vocalist who had a great, controlled voice. It benefited from the "trueness" of the Cool Channel, as it needed a pre that was "open" and detailed with no added coloration to the signal, except for just a hint of smoothness. In these situations, I turned the impedance knob to its highest setting, which really brought out the high end.

But, when it was time to use a tube mic, I kept shying away from the Cool pre and exploring a bit of the added warmth present in the Tube Channel, as the effect is not overwhelming (unless you want it to be) — you can get a very clear, sharp sound out of the Tube Channel. I especially liked the Tube Channel, which reminded me a bit of the sound I get from the Langevin DVC; when paired with a Rode K2 or an Audio-Technica 4060, it

allows me to preserve the character of the mic if I want, or alter it with strong color.

When miking an acoustic guitar, the Cool Channel gave a punchy, crisp top end that was full and up front — which made it a better choice for more balanced-sounding instruments (Martin guitars, for example). Conversely, when the artist was using a brighter-sounding acoustic guitar (a Taylor in this case), the Tube Channel seemed to be the better option.

I ended up using the Cool Channel's "60s" and "70s" option for that oft-sought vintage console sound, especially on the acoustic guitar, but also on some of the more naturally silky vocals; it affected the depth positively, opening up the sound just enough and clipping in a good way, adding a very gentle distortion. This feature alone made me feel as if I had doubled the amount of available sounds of the box, giving me a lot of breathing room. Also, after I had

dialled in my settings, I found that utilizing the Iron knob is another feature that changes the tonality of the signal without reducing the depth and openness. If anything it acts not unlike a high-frequency expander when turned counter-clockwise — especially if you use the 1/4" output, as it adjusts the output transformer. Essentially it's sort of like getting a variety of transformer colors, and even what might be the opposite sound of a transformer. This knob allowed a change to the sound which was much more subtle compared to the "60s/70s" switch.

### CONCLUSION

All in all, the TNT is one of the more flexible boxes out there. With a wide variety of control options, you can get numerous pre sounds out of the two channels and, most importantly, they all sound damn good. If you are looking for a tube pre to treat signals coming from brighter instruments, from sharp vocals to cutting

guitar to brass or cymbals, the Tube Channel is a comfortable, warm-sounding pre. And if you need a very true sound for already smooth vocals, full drums, bass, or overdriven guitars, the Cool Channel just can't be beat. And the best part? You get all of these options in one unit, which is why the TNT comes with, and will continue to come with, high recommendations. *EQ*

**Product Type:** Two-channel/two mic pre-amp combination rackmount box.

**Target Market:** Studios wanting the Manley Slam! sound without the (overtly) painful price point, while also looking for solid-state pre capabilities.

**Strengths:** Solid construction, flexible performance, high-end sounds with a relatively affordable price tag.

**Limitations:** Tube Channel filter options not as expansive as Cool Channel filter options.

**Price:** \$3,000 list

**Contact:** [www.manleylabs.com](http://www.manleylabs.com)

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