

# Empirical Labs Fatso

Brad Watts makes a straight line for some musical non-linearities.

Empirical Labs made quite an impact with the Distressor dynamics processor – the chameleon-like compressor with the ‘Nuke’ button and the blue LEDs. Its mission was military strength compression with covert instructions to masquerade as just about every dynamics device known to the free world. Empirical Labs’ next mission, should it be accepted, is the Fatso, or Full Analog Tape Simulator & Optimizer. What’s it for? Well, where do I start? Primarily the Fatso’s job is to add that little bit of pizzazz, or, as EL put it, those ‘musical non-linearities’ exhibited by tube, class A, and magnetic tape mediums, along with Distressor-style compression and a transformer path. It’s a ‘tapemachine-in-a-box’ without the tape, motors, rollers and other troublesome moving parts.



It’s a warmth generator with compression and limiting.

Unlike the Distressor, the Fatso is a stereo (or dual mono) device. It’s a completely analogue device under digital control and only fills a single rack space. Connection is via XLR or 6.5mm jacks. A link or sidechain input and channel inserts are also provided on 6.5mm jacks. Why would you need to link a stereo unit to another? For surround operation of course! While the Fatso is aimed at users of hard disk recording systems, there is no digital I/O. This may seem odd until you’re informed of the Fatso’s \$6k asking price. Adding digital I/O would only add to the cost and anyone seriously considering such a unit would, I’m sure, rather use their own converters. Four large knobs grace the front panel as input and output control for each of the two paths and three momentary buttons switch each side through their various operations. The ‘Comp’ button cycles the Fatso through four different types of compression, the bypass button toggles through either the compression mode only, compression plus the added transformer emulation circuit and, of course, complete bypass. The third button cycles through eight stages of high frequency saturation or warmth – hence it’s dubbed the ‘Warmth’ button. Holding both the Warmth buttons puts the unit into Linked mode. However, in Linked mode, only the bypass button operation is linked, everything else must still be set individually.

The second and third order harmonics generation of the Fatso are always switched in, unless you bypass completely. The amount of harmonics and soft clipping rely on how hard you push the input. The compression types are where you really know this is an Empirical Labs box, with four basic compression styles. The first is Buss mode and is

designed to mimic an SSL stereo bus compressor – giving you that extra bit of level without going over the top into pumping. It gives you a ratio of 2:1 with slow attack and fast release with a very soft knee. The ‘GP’ or general purpose compressor has medium attack and slow release – more for keeping levels constant and in tow without too much hoopla. Another press of the button lights the two Buss and GP LEDs to put the Fatso into ‘Tracking Compression’ – an 1176-style compression aimed at tracking instruments and vocals. Continues cycling of the comp button brings ‘Spank’ into the picture. Spank offers a shamelessly aggressive squeeze designed to emulate the bite of the talkback compressor found in older SSL consoles. This can be combined with the other settings for a total of seven different styles of compression, but keep a close eye on Spank as it really does squash the living heck out of your signal. The release curves of all the settings are logarithmic – meaning it releases quickly but then the rate of release begins to slow. All the compressors are ‘soft-knee’, making the initial onset of the gain reduction difficult to notice – it doesn’t grind your signal immediately into the ground. Following the dynamics path is the warmth circuitry. EL advise setting this after you’re happy with the compression setting – adding warmth to taste afterwards.

The variety of combinations allows the Fatso to emulate many compression feels – while use of the ‘Tranny’ mode offers even more flavours. EL seem to aim the unit at mixing and tracking, which is where I’m sure it will find its home – when I initially received the unit I immediately put it into a mastering scenario and was soon disappointed. But after that I dragged the box around to a few other studios (both tracking and mastering) to see what they thought about it. Most engineers that tried the Fatso loved it for tracking, especially the digital multitrack guys. They loved the warmth settings but were concerned that they had so little control over the dynamics – EL might say, ‘well, that’s what the Distressor is for’. The mastering boys weren’t so impressed and quite rightly, this box is truly a tracking and vibe box. For these chores the Fatso excels. While it definitely isn’t in the price range for the project market, the larger tracking and mixing facilities will find the Fatso a blessing.



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## Price

• \$5,995