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Best of Show Up Close: Wheatstone AirAura X5

Processor unites analog and HD Radio for a better radio listening experience

RW STAFF · JUN 24, 2019



“Best of Show Up Close” is a series about participants in Radio World’s annual [Best of Show at NAB Awards](#) program.

Wheatstone nominated the AirAura X5 processor. It is a processor aimed at stations with FM analog and HD Radio signals. Optimized for handling the unique mission of making sure that analog and HD Radio “blend,” it also offers the usual complement of processor tools such as EQs and limiters.

We asked Mike Erickson for more info.

Radio World: Wheatstone has said that the AirAura X5 takes into consideration the FM and the HD as “one experience.” What do you mean and how does it do that?



Mike Erickson: The HD section of the processor includes the tools needed to maintain alignment and the FM section gives you tools to maximize the experience when blend occurs. These include the built in FM/HD tuner to measure and maintain alignment in the processor without third-party boxes. It also includes our LimitLess technology that manages pre-emphasis in a way processing has never before dealt with it. Broadcasters are realizing HD is no longer in the sidecar. HD radio as standard equipment in cars is now above 50% market saturation. This means that for a large audience segment the listening experience now has to consider both modes. If the HD is out of step with the analog because of sonic or alignment issues, it can and will lead to tune-out. The X5 prevents this like no other processor on the market.

RW: *This is a competitive market segment. What sets the X5 apart from other FM/HD processors?*

Erickson: Our LimitLess technology, FM/HD tuner and alignment, how we designed our insert point technology (PPMport), and the LiveLogger function. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, these exclusive functions come together to form a processor that deals with audio as well as engineering needs. When shopping for a processor, broadcasters need to look for designs that meet sonic as well as practical needs of their stations. X5 offers automatic time alignment, a built in full-featured RDS, our specialized insert point, and a logger to track preset takes and other activities. You won't find another processor on the market that comes even close to fulfilling all those functions.

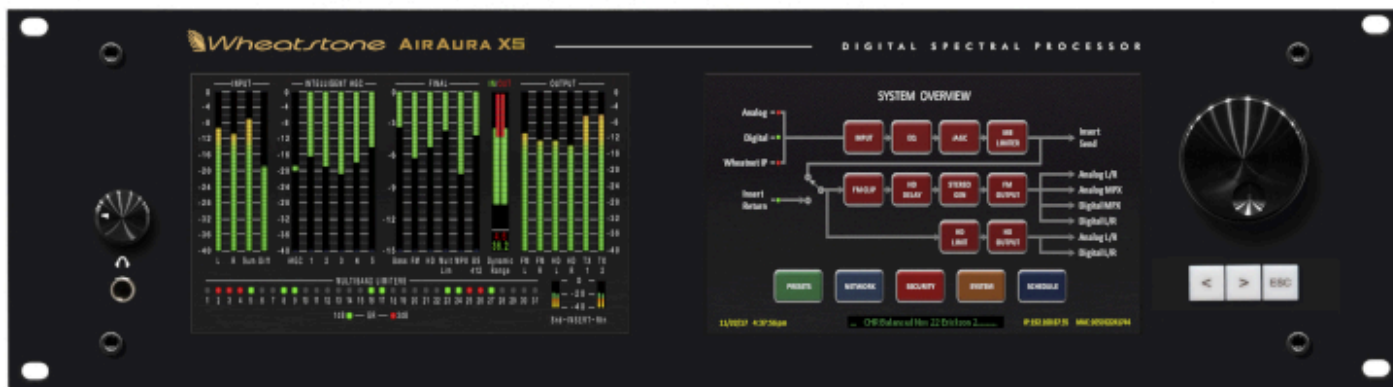
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RW: *You put a lot of emphasis on its LimitLess clipper technology. Why?*

Erickson: Jeff Keith, Steve Dove and I were all talking about how we could achieve the kind of transient audio you'd get from the HD side of our audio processors into the FM side. This, of course, plays into our goal of making the FM/HD radio listening experience on compatible receivers the best it can be. The X3 was cutting edge because of its 31-band limiter and how that interacted as a separate entity to the clipper. Now these two functions are combined ...plus our addition of a new and exciting pre-emphasis embedding algorithm in the clipper, one that makes the highs jump out at you with astonishing detail; something we have not been able to replicate with any other processor in our lab.

RW: *Is the processor shipping? What does it cost?*

Erickson: It ships July 2019. We already have some beta units on the air and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. List price is \$14,500, but our Wheatstone dealers can offer our customers the best pricing as well as set up demos for X5.



RW: What else should we know about the box?

Erickson: I touched on it before, but the PPMport is very cool. It’s not just an insert point; it’s the end result of over a decade working with PPM technology, both in the field at CBS Radio when PPM was rolled out and Dom Theodore and I did a lot of testing of the gear. Add that to my work with customers since joining Wheatstone in 2010. Needless to say, the data and good practices I’ve cultivated in the field have gone into PPMport, at what point the watermark is inserted, and how it interacts with LimitLess to put the mark “closer” to the meter than ever before.

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