



# Universal Audio Empirical Labs EL8 Distressor

£249

PC MAC

The latest in a stream of Distressor sims is endorsed by the manufacturer of the real thing, but is it the final word?

> Honestly, you wait an age for one quality software Distressor to arrive, then three come along at once...

Universal Audio's virtualisation of Empirical Labs' seminal 1993 compressor for UAD-2 and Apollo systems (VST/AU/AAX) is described by original inventor Dave Derr as the definitive version, suggesting that it's "probably indistinguishable from the hardware". With EL8 Distressor sharing market space with his own supercharged emulation, the Empirical Labs Arouser (9/10, **cm244**), as well as Slate Digital's staggeringly realistic FG-Stress (10/10, **cm251**), that's quite an endorsement.

## 'Stressed out

While Arouser completely reimagines the real Distressor's 1U rackmount front panel to take its numerous extra features into account, and FG-Stress squeezes it comfortably into its own proprietary 'lunchbox' format, EL8 Distressor snaps it in the half and layers the original layout over two tiers. The bottom half houses the right-hand end: Input, Output, Attack and Release dials, plus a wet/dry Mix knob for parallel compression, the last, of course, unavailable in the hardware. Above that, the 'left-hand' controls comprise Ratio selection, sidechain Detector mode selection, and Audio distortion and filtering mode selection. The full array of metering LEDs are in place, too: Gain Reduction,

1% THD (Total Harmonic Distortion) and Redline (3% THD and clipping). It looks exactly like a 'folded' version of the real thing.

Alongside the Mix control, EL8 Distressor also adds to the established parameter set with the Headroom calibration screw. This sets the internal reference level of the plugin, enabling the distortion characteristics and dynamic response to be tweaked independently of the input level – a 'sensitivity' control of sorts.

## The nuclear option

Any virtual Distressor is destined to live or die by the accuracy of those eight all-important ratios, the quality of its distortion, and its attack speed, particularly at low ratios. Selecting a ratio also switches in an accompanying compression threshold and knee shape, and the top three options shift to entirely separate detection circuits, 10:1 emulating an opto curve and the 20:1 and "Nuke" setting serving up ultra-heavy compression and full-on limiting.

As one would hope, given Derr's unbridled praise of it, EL8 Distressor comprehensively nails that familiar sound and response, from the gentle lower ratios, through the versatile middle settings to the characterful Opto and crushing Nuke. No doubt about it, Universal Audio have successfully captured every nuance and wrinkle of the hardware, right down to the mono Linked "dead patch" behaviour.

It's odd, then, that the "Brit" mode of the EL8X hardware model isn't also featured. This apes the 'all ratio buttons in' mode of the Urei 1176 (one of the several vintage compressors that informed the design of the Distressor), for extra impact and aggression, and its omission here is a downer.

Still, in every other regard, EL8 Distressor is a blinder. Like so many other UAD emulations, it's utterly convincing, feeling and sounding as close as it's surely possible to get to the real deal in software, whether used for tracking in the UAD Console or mixing in a DAW. **cm**

Web [www.uaudio.com](http://www.uaudio.com)

## Alternatively

**Slate Digital FG-Stress**  
**cm251** » 10/10 » \$199

Runs in Slate's Virtual Mix Rack and was the last word in software Distressor emulation...

**Empirical Labs Arouser**  
**cm244** » 9/10 » \$349

Breaks away from the literal Distressor template with some cunning new additions

## Verdict

**For** Probably the best Distressor emulating plugin yet

All the versatility of the original  
Mix control for parallel compression  
Headroom control for extra tweaking

**Against** No Brit mode

Like having a real Distressor inside your DAW, EL8 Distressor brings one of the greatest dynamics processors ever made to Apollo and UAD-2 in style

10/10

## Too much choice

**With three truly excellent Distressor plugins now available, how does the hapless-in-the-box producer choose between them?**

First of all, we can emphatically state that if 100% flawless emulation is your primary concern, UA's EL8 Distressor is the one to go for... assuming, of course, you're packing the necessary DSP hardware: an Apollo or UAD-2 interface. If you're not, you'll need to factor in at a minimum of £590 on top of the price of the plugin.

**For those who prefer to keep things native, FG-Stress runs in Slate Digital's Virtual Mix Rack plugin and stands as a cheaper but near-indistinguishable-in-the-mix alternative.**

**Arouser is now a bit of a puzzler. It adds a few new features to the Distressor core, including the brilliant Attack Modification parameter and variable soft clipping, but feels rather less like the hardware because of it. Perhaps that one should be viewed as the next generation of Distressor.**