Nick Mac uses Focusrite ISA One



As chief engineer of the production studios of Electric Feel Entertainment, home to a roster of A-list artists, producers, songwriters, brands, and partners, Nick Mac has long made use of the Focusrite ISA 428 MkII multichannel microphone preamplifier and ISA 430 channel strip. More recently, working with 24kGoldn as his personal engineer, Nick has added Focusrite's ISA One desktop mic preamp to his mobile rig to deliver the tonality and flexibility to which he has become accustomed in the studio.

Nick, a California native, whose engineering credits also include Post Malone, YG, Macklemore, Ariel Pink, Machine Gun Kelly, Tyla Yaweh, Travis Barker, Yungblud, and others, has been working with 24kGoldn for the last couple of years, both traveling and in the studio. Two or three months ago, he slimmed down his mobile rig to a Pelican case containing a recording interface and his latest Focusrite preamp.

"It's one of the most feature-packed devices I've ever seen, with a quality that I really like," Nick says of the ISA One, which pairs the classic Focusrite mic pre with an independent DI channel, both with selectable transformer impedance settings, in a rugged, portable enclosure. "The tactile control that I have on that front panel for the mic pre and the headphones is just unbelievable. I'm in love with the thing."

Not every brand of mic preamp pairs well with the Sony C-800G vocal microphone favored by many of today's artists, Nick says. "But I like the ISA; it's a little bit weighty but it's clean, and I think it rounds off the edges of the 800. It's nice and warm and a little bit muscular, but it's clear and clean. It's just a nice color that I like. I think it sounds great."

The monitoring functionality of the ISA One has become central to his workflow, Nick says. "One of the key features that gets me really excited is being able to switch between monitoring the mic input by itself and the cue mix. So, if we get a dirty signal or something in a studio, I can isolate the microphone and listen to that

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before any processing. It's really, really helpful.” “The ISA One one of the most feature packed devices I've ever seen, with a quality that I really like... I'm in love with the thing.”

Nick, who has been working with 24kGoldn on an upcoming record, likes to ride the mic pre level while tracking vocals. “I ride the fader on the way in with that trim knob. I'm a big meters person, so I’m watching a Durrough meter plugin inside of Pro Tools, watching my crest factor, watching how it hits the converters and drives into the compressor. 24k's a loud singer, but there's enough gain on the ISA One to where, when he does go quiet, I can jump it up with the step gain and use the trim. Conversely, when he does get loud, I can knock it back, and use the trim to bring him up. It's all right there within reach.”

Nick is a long-time fan of Focusrite’s ISA mic preamps, using the ISA 428 MkII four-channel preamp, for example, on every track he engineered for Tyla Yahweh’s 2019 debut album, Heart Full of Rage, and on projects with Iann Dior. In the B room at Electric Feel Studios in West Hollywood, he says, “We’ve got an ISA 428 plus an ISA 430 channel strip that floats between the A and B room. I also have an ISA 430 that I bought for sessions before coming to Electric Feel, and that floats around the studio as well.”

Nick’s personal ISA 430 was in a rolling rack that spent most of 2020 in Utah, where he was working with Post Malone on his recently released album Twelve Carat Toothache. “I started the record using the 430 and I would use it in front of my interface and go line-in to Pro Tools. It was that simple,” he says. “I feel like a lot of people sleep a little bit on the ISA stuff. I hope more people do start using it for vocals, or whatever... It's a little secret gem.” That mobile rig houses everything he needs for a session, Nick continues. “There's a computer, an interface for conversion, a Tube Tech, 1176, a Distressor, a pair of Neve-style BAE 1073s and an ISA 430 vocal pre that I would use every time. I used it on Post and I used it on Travis Barker's snare drum. And there were two pairs of Genelec monitors — 8351s and 1032s — and a sub.”

The ISA preamps are derived from the classic transformer-coupled unit designed for Sir George Martin’s AIR studios in 1985 by Rupert Neve when he was working with Focusrite. “I think everyone wants a Neve pre. The 1073 is great, it's a classic,” Nick says. “But don’t forget that Rupert designed the ISA 110 module. I feel like a lot of people sleep a little bit on the ISA stuff. I hope more people do start using it for vocals, or whatever. But for me, when people are going one way, I want to go another way that's unique, a little bit different, that's going to give my artist a different sound. It's a little secret gem.”

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