



REVIEW

Sonic Farm was founded in 2009 in Vancouver, BC, Canada. The company is owned and run by lifelong friends Zoran Todorovic and Boris Drazic, who met in 1966 when they formed their first band in their home country, then known as Yugoslavia.

Sonic Farm's modus operandi is, "To come up with pro audio equipment that the market is not saturated with"—in other words, no clones of famous gear of yesteryear. Their philosophy is, "To do whatever gets the right tone." As such they don't care if they use tubes, transistors, IC chips, or op amps, as long as it sounds good!

Currently the company's line consists of five units: The Creamer and Creamer Plus 2-channel tube preamps; the Creamliner 2-



Sonic Farm 2DI4 Pentode Direct Box

Think DI boxes are boring? Think again...

channel tube/transformer line-level signal conditioner; the brand-new Silkworm 500 Series preamp; and the item we are looking at today, the 2DI4 Pentode Direct Box.

To die four

The 2DI4 is a single-channel Direct Box that uses a class-A circuit built around an EF86 pentode tube; this is followed by a solid-state buffer and an output which is either transformer- or op amp-balanced (more below). While a simple and direct circuit design, the 2DI4 has a healthy number of tone-shaping tricks up its sleeve that keep it from being just a one-trick pony.

As a DI unit ("Direct Input" or "Direct Injection"), the 2DI4 is built for portability, complete with a metal carrying handle on top. The box itself measures roughly 11.5 x 6 x 3.5". It is of all-metal construction and is dressed, like all Sonic Farm boxes, in a red enamel finish with black and white accents.

On its rear panel it has a pair of male XLR outputs; one is a transformer-balanced DI output and the other is an op amp-balanced standard line output. This allows you to use the unit as a traditional DI with a mixing console, a preamp-equipped desktop interface, or any mic preamp of your choice, or you can use it on its own as a line-level front end for recording instruments direct. [Sonic Farm elaborates: "The DI output's special Cinemag transformer brings line-level signals down to mic level and alters the unit's output impedance to that of vintage tube mics... the transformer also protects the DI circuitry from 48V phantom power if accidentally turned on from the mic preamp."—MM]

Also on the back of the box is a ground switch, a power switch and a 3-prong IEC connector for the unit's internal power supply (no line lumps or wall-warts here). Additional I/O is located on the front, with a 1/4" unbalanced input, and a 1/4"

unbalanced buffered amplifier output for looping back into your amplifier.

Input, drive and tone

Next to the 1/4" I/O in front are controls for input, tone and output. Overall, input is largely handled from the output of your source, be it guitar, bass, or keyboard, and it is monitored by a 2-stage signal LED that lights green when signal is present and red when the input becomes clipped. On a tube box, clipping is not always a bad thing!

Additionally, the 2DI4 offers a few ways to tweak the input signal. There is a 3-position toggle switch that offers a 12 dB cut if your input is too hot, as well as a Mute setting which is useful when changing instruments or when your instrument is plugged in but sitting idle between takes. This switch comes after the tube stage and before the output buffer.

If you need more gain, there is a gain button that offers either 5 dB or 9 dB



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depending on how the next button labeled T/P is set. "T/P"? Read on...

Triode or Pentode?

T/P stands for Triode or Pentode mode, and is a setting most often found on tube guitar amps with pentode tubes like the EF86. Such tubes can be run in Pentode mode, making full use of the tube, or in Triode mode (the 12AX7 is a triode tube). In Triode mode, half of the tube's power is dispersed and the tube runs at roughly half power, which gives the output less volume, but one that is easier to overdrive. On the 2DI4, Pentode mode offers 33 dB of gain, while Triode mode is 24 dB. The folks at Sonic Farm note that pressing the button and changing the tube's characteristics will cause a loud thump, so hit that Mute switch first!

Between the Gain and T/P buttons is a Tube Heater LED indicator, and this should be on when the unit is powered up.

Tweak the tone

Next up are a pair of 3-position toggle switches, labeled LO and HI Boost. These are gentle shelving eqs set at 300 Hz and 500 Hz for low and 2 kHz and 4 kHz on the high side. Like all the settings on the unit, they react differently in Triode and Pentode modes, and at maximum offer a 4.5 dB boost in Triode and 9 dB in Pentode, both with 6 dB/octave slope.

If their overall effect is not to your taste, a pair of recessed trim knobs (only accessible with a miniature screwdriver) can help to back that down. Also note that these tonal boosts are only available when the Gain switch is out; that's because the eq boosts are part of the tube stage and not a separate circuit, so you can either have broadband boost (Gain) or selective boost (LO and HI).

Studio and stage

I first became aware of Sonic Farm when I met Zoran at last year's San Francisco AES show, and I have to thank him for giving me some very extended time with the 2DI4. Over the last four months I have used the unit both live and in the studio, on acoustic steel-string guitars ranging from an entry-level Dean to a mid-level Takamine up to a couple of high-end Martins and trio of various Taylors. I have also used it on a bunch of different Fender basses, a Gretsch hollow-body acoustic bass, and electric guitars ranging from a Fender Telecaster to a Japanese Ibanez S Series. Additionally, I have used it on an electric violin, a Fender Rhodes electric piano, and a Moog Voyager analog synthesizer. I list all of these sources only to show that the 2DI4 plays no favorites and has a large range of uses.

I will also say that I have found a use for this box in every studio session I have done in that time, as well as every live show I have run sound for. This is no exaggeration, it's a simple fact.

Range of sounds

Want another fact? The 2DI4 sounds incredible! On every source it is a presence booster that adds a nice touch of "woolliness" to the mids as well as a nice edge to the top end.

A few months back, in our February 2013 issue, I took a look at another fantastic-sounding tube DI by another Canadian company, the Radial Engineering Firefly. In that review I mentioned that, while it is a tube box, the Firefly lives on the cleaner side of the tube spectrum, and it was pretty much impossible to push it into tube overdrive. The 2DI4 is a very different beast; it can be pushed into a nice overdriven tone, thanks to its gain boost and T/P modes. It's not as drastic as a tube-based effects pedal, but it can still put some "hair" on the source.

Having said that, the 2DI4 is not an over-the-top slushy tube warmer either. When compared to the line input on another device of mine, the Universal Audio SOLO/610 (which is darker with a rounder top end), the 2DI4 is still a nice clear modern sound. Also, in this comparison it is readily apparent what people mean when they talk about a preamp being "fast" or "slow", as the 610's transient response is pretty sluggish compared to the 2DI4.

On bass I preferred the 2DI4's Triode mode, which had the most grit and was fuller in the low end. On direct acoustic guitar, Pentode is the better choice as it adds a tad less personality. On electric guitar it was a tossup and depended on whether I was trying to capture a dry guitar signal for later re-amping or whether I was after an in-your-face direct-injected guitar track.

The tone switches add just a hint of top end and a slight firmness to the bottom, and their effect gets stronger if you crank up the trimpots. I also found their effect to be dependent on how hard the tube stage was being driven, and very subject to the input source. Both settings enhance a sound that is already there rather than creating what is not there.

Conclusion

With the 2DI4 the folks at Sonic Farm have done a great job of creating a tone box that adds a tube personality in very versatile ways. The 2DI4 avoids the stereotypical dark muddiness that is often considered "vintage", offering both character and clarity in a lovely balance.

The best praise I can give the 2DI4 is to reiterate that I have used it in every studio session and live sound gig since it entered my life. In other words, the 2DI4 really is "to die for". ☺

Price: \$850 Canadian

More from: Sonic Farm,
www.sonicfarm.com

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5408 Idylwild Trail, Boulder, CO 80301
Tel: (303) 516-9118 Fax: (303) 516-9119
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