If you plan on splashing the cash on a DI box of the highest quality, this versatile red box should definitely be on your audition list!

BOB THOMAS



Sonic Farm 2DI4 MkII

Valve DI Box

Founded in Vancouver, Canada, in 2009, Sonic Farm design and manufacture an impressive range of original, high-quality audio hardware. Uniquely, as far as I can tell, all of their valve-based products are hybrid designs, featuring EF86 pentode-based input gain stages and solid-state outputs. The original version of the company's 2DI4 Pentode Direct Box was released way back in 2014, and it was already lovely, but now, over a decade on, they've decided to expand its feature set. The result is the new 2DI4 MkII reviewed here.

Controls & Features

As with every Sonic Farm product I've encountered to date, the workmanship, component quality and construction of the MkII are of the highest quality. The chunky, blood-red, all-metal enclosure is similar in outline to that of the original version, but the latter's solid metal handle has now been replaced by a rubberised strap — a simple but thoughtful change that means it's now possible to stack multiple units. The inside is different though, with new features and a redesigned circuit board. And it's not often that I single out a power supply for special praise, but the 2DI4 MkII's chunky internal toroidal mains transformer and associated filter board were a welcome sight. The fact that this power supply shares an enclosure with unscreened audio circuits, without any detectable impact on its sonic performance, is a testament to Sonic Farm's engineering skills.

In terms of facilities, the 2DI4 MkII offers the I/O that you'd expect of any DI box, but also a lot more besides. On the left of the front panel is a quarter-inch jack for the unbalanced 2.2MΩ input, but you'll also find both an auxiliary input and a headphone output. The aux input can accept the output of a computer, mobile device, media player or Bluetooth receiver, the idea being that it makes it possible to use the device for practice; the aux signal is routed directly to the headphone output, where it can be mixed with the DI signal to taste using the large chicken-head output level knob (of which more later). The rear panel carries XLR connectors for both that main transformer-balanced microphone-level output, as well as an electronically balanced line-level output. Underneath sit two quarter-inch jack sockets to carry the buffered instrument-level thru signal and an unbalanced line-level output. Note that the aux signal isn't present on any of these outputs — it's only auditioned on the dedicated headphone out. Finally, there are a ground-lift switch, a mains voltage selector and a fused IEC mains connector.

Returning to the front, a blue LED lights to confirm the presence of the EF86's heater voltage, thus serving as a power-present indicator, and a Triode/Pentode mode switch (with dual-colour LED: green for signal-present, red for overload) selects the valve operating mode, of which more in the separate 'Pentode & Triode Modes' box.

You'll also find four three-position switches. The leftmost applies a M, L or H (mid, low or high-gain) boost. Measuring a 400Hz sine wave on my DAW's VU meters showed that the M (mid) boost added +7dB in pentode mode and +3dB in triode, while H (high) added +16.5 and 6 dB for the pentode and triode modes, respectively. (The boosts were the same for 1 and 10 kHz sine waves). The next two switches activate low- and high-frequency shelf boosts, and select their corner frequencies. There are twin recessed trim pots to set the level of these 6dB/octave shelving boosts (up to +9dB in pentode mode and +4.5dB in triode mode), which can be set to 300 or 500 Hz for the low shelf, and 2 or 4 kHz for the high one. (When no filters are engaged, the 2DI4 MkII's frequency response is quoted as ±3dB from 10Hz to 50kHz.) A final switch can engage a -12dB pad or mute the output.

As in a guitar or bass amplifier, the instrument input is connected directly to the control grid of the EF86 pentode, which operates in Class A at a plate voltage of 285V. This valve is the MkII's only gain stage, in fact, and the high voltage (in the normal range for preamp stages of valve guitar amps) gives the MkII a significantly higher headroom than the many valve preamps that operate on starved plate voltages. The EF86's output signal is routed to the Cinemag transformer that provides the usual balanced DI output and, in parallel, both the balanced and unbalanced line-level outputs.

Above, I mentioned in passing the large output level knob found on the front panel. This has no effect on the valve stage at all, but as well as allowing you to set

the balance of the aux and DI signals in the headphones output, this sets the overall level for the various other outputs. Since it affects the level before the signal hits the DI output's balancing transformer, it also serves (in conjunction with the level of the incoming instrument signal and your chosen settings for the pentode/triode mode, boost, and low and high shelf) to determine the amount of transformer-related harmonic distortion at this output.

Pentode & Triode Modes

The 2DI4 MkII's EF86 valve can be switched between triode and pentode modes, and due to the differences in gain, harmonic distortion and bias configuration, each has its own sonic signature. A pentode offers higher gain (about 7dB more in this case) than a triode, and there's ample evidence that an EF86 pentode is well suited to guitar amplification — it features in the normal channels of Vox's 1960s AC10, 15 and 30 amps. The pentode mode's greater gain comes at the cost of headroom, meaning that harmonic distortion begins at lower levels than in triode mode, but that's not necessarily a bad thing from a guitarist's point of view. Triode mode might offer less gain, and be less 'effective' at higher frequencies, but it delivers the warmer-sounding, more linear performance that's characteristic of the 12AX7 triodes found in the preamp stages of so many guitar amps.

In Use

Just as I'd hoped, the 2DI4 proved to be extremely flexible and a great-sounding DI: in both the pentode and triode modes, there's something extremely attractive about the way that it adds warmth while still bringing out the details in a sound. The performance with electric guitars was an instant delight, and the characteristics of instruments fitted with single-coil and humbucking pickups were conveyed with impressive detail.

It's well worth exploring and exploiting the pentode/triode switching and various gain and EQ boost permutations to sculpt a great guitar sound, and I'd say that's particularly the case if you're into re-amping or seeking a source to drive the pedal, amp, cab and effects models within your DAW. In general, my personal preference overall has been for triode mode, but there were times when only the pentode profile would do it for me. Do note that switching between the triode and pentode modes involves switching off the EF86's screen and bias configurations — this creates loud transients, so you should take care to mute the MkII before doing this.

The distortions are relatively subtle until the levels are pushed fairly assertively. With my early Heritage H-150's humbuckers on 11, pentode mode engaged, gain boost set to high and output control fully open, I heard a pleasant crunch coming from the DI output. Backing the output control off until that crunch vanished left me with a big, warm, clean sound full of harmonic colour. Switching to triode mode revealed a clean sound that gave those humbuckers a more defined, articulate character that I really liked. Repeating the experiment with my Strat and its custom-shop single-coil pickups yielded similar results, with its performance in triode mode being my absolute favourite overall.

The results I obtained when pairing the MkII with acoustic guitars fitted with magnetic or piezo pickup systems were also impressive. Personally, I think that valve-based preamps tend to produce more natural and musical results with pickup-equipped acoustics than with their solid-state equivalents, and the MkII did nothing to prove me wrong. With basses (both electric and acoustic), it delivered further outstanding performances. For a bass that delivers articulation, tonal balance and detail across its register, the MkII will showcase its abilities, and allow you to explore further possibilities within them. Keyboardists, especially those who record or gig with vintage Fender Rhodes and Wurlitzer electric pianos, should also consider auditioning this red box. I could also see the 2DI4 MkII doing nice things to the outputs of analogue and digital synths.

Final Thoughts

High-quality valve DI boxes naturally tend to be relatively high-ticket items but, to my mind, the performance of Sonic Farm's 2DI4 MkII more than justifies the asking price. Of particular note is the EF86 pentode/triode switching — it's something I've not encountered in any DI box before now, and it expands the 2DI4 MkII's versatility and appeal significantly.

For over a decade, my go-to DI for acoustic and electric guitar and bass has been a now-discontinued valve-based device whose performance has seen off several challengers in that time. But the Sonic Farm 2DI4 MkII has qualities that complement and sometimes exceed my ageing favourite's capabilities, particularly when I'm re-amping. It is that special. The thought of having both available to me is extremely tempting...



In addition to the transformer-balanced mic-level output, there are both balanced and unbalanced line-level outs on the rear and, round the front, an aux input and stereo headphone output.

summary

A flexible, valve-based DI box with a versatility and a performance level that more than justifies its price.

£ £668.04 plus VAT and shipping.
T Sonic Farm +1 778 863 1613
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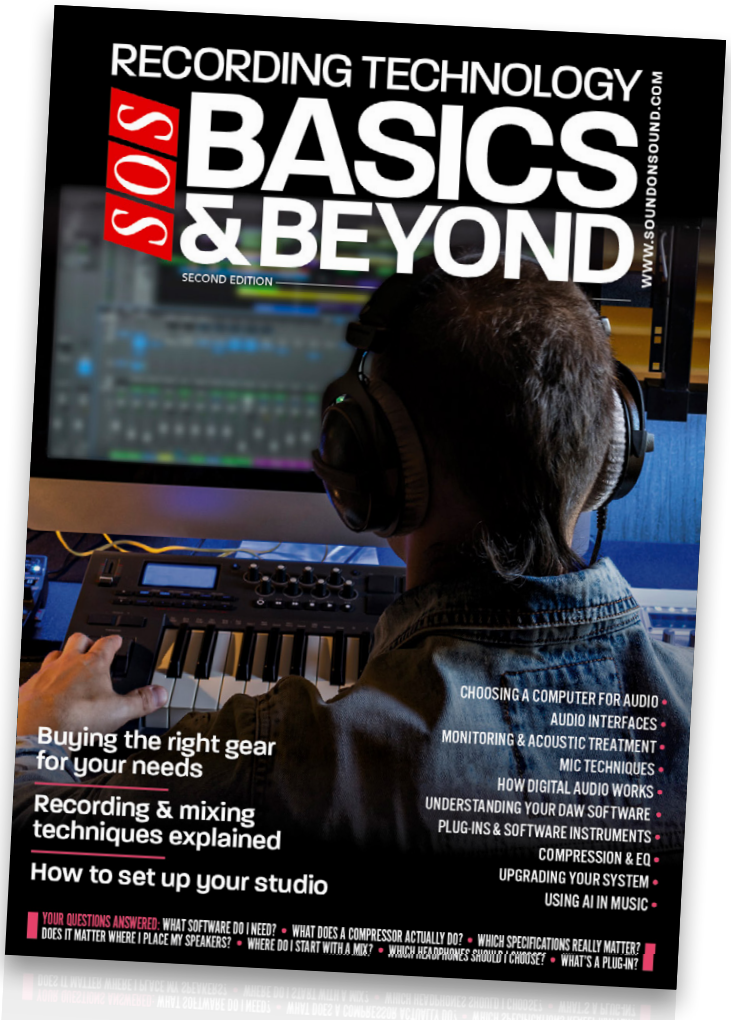
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