



From the first moment another engineer raved about a Little Labs DI to me, I knew that this company was onto something special. It turns out Little Labs is Jonathan Little, a man who lives and works out of a funky mansion in the Hollywood Hills where he designs and QC's his unique audio products while blasting vinyl from his dining room-based DJ setup and throwing late-night parties for his interesting friends. A physics professor father and formative years in the nascent San Francisco punk scene (with his pals The Sleepers), led to The College for Recording Arts and eventually a journey to L.A. to look for work. There's even a documentary out soon, *Little Labs Life: In Phase with Jonathan Little* by Alain Le Kim, which is informative and very entertaining.

How did you end up working as a tech in studios?

I moved to L.A. in 1978 and I got a job at Salty Dog Recording in Van Nuys. We recorded stuff like Joe Cocker and The Crusaders. We used to take [Neumann] U47s and convert them. We sent out a kit to turn them into a line level mic and I put those kits together. But now it's like, "What the fuck were we thinking?"

Where did you learn your tech repair skills?

I built stuff. My dad found (in the basement of the physics department at Stanford University) these JBL scoops that were actually Joan Baez's first PA - her dad was a physicist there. I made crossovers for them and I built a bunch of power amps to bi-amp them. I learned electronics at Stanford University in my dad's grad students' labs (actually called Little Labs - that's where the name comes from), because they had me put together oscilloscope power supplies and things. He taught physics there from 1958 to 1994 - he is now a professor emeritus. So I learned a lot and it was a cool time (the '60s and '70s) to be in Palo Alto. I think it was my sister who said, "You'd better go to The College for Recording Arts, otherwise dad's going to be suspicious that you're selling dope." I was glad I did. Towards the end of the Recording Arts course I was 17 and I was thinking, "How can I get into the business?" So I wrote a paper called, "A Closer Look at Time and

Phase-Corrected Speaker Systems" (which later I put in the end of the IBP manual). I sent that out with my resume, saying, "This is some of my work." Tom Lubin, the editor of *RE/P Magazine*, said to come see him in Hollywood. He goes, "We can't publish this because it's too editorial in content for a 17-year-old." I said, "But can you help me get a job?" He got me the interview at Salty Dog. So I worked for Salty Dog for a couple of years, then I went from there to Devonshire Studios - a studio that's in the valley too. I got in there and they didn't have a tech. Crosby, Stills & Nash were doing a record there called *Daylight Again*, and the studio had one of those MCI 556 [consoles]. It was like the precursor to the SSL. I knew the 500-series because Salty Dog had a 528 MCI and 3M M79 tape machines. On my first day Graham Nash goes, "You want a puff off of this joint?" It just blew my mind, fucked me up. Then all of a sudden the automation went down on the MCI and I had to figure it out. It just made it so much harder to do the work that shouldn't have been all that hard. [laughter] I left there with the help of Toby Foster, who is now part of Martin Sound Studio, to work for Cherokee Studios around 1982. We did a lot of metal there, like Mötley Crüe's *Shout at the Devil*, but also early John Cougar Mellencamp shit. It was a good studio - three Trident A Range [consoles]!

So when you moved to a new studio would you have to learn how to maintain all the new equipment?

Yeah, and I was always building stuff. We had a grey market Neve Necam automation at Cherokee that was somehow bought through a back channel to install on a Trident, which was pretty nutty. I built this whole fixture for adjusting the faders and being able to make sure they worked properly. Then in 1984 I was hired by the guys from Toto. Eddie Simeone (he works for TC Electronic now) wanted me to build this VCA box for them so they could subgroup all of their keyboards. It's basically a control voltage box to control the volumes of multiple keyboards with foot pedals - pre-MIDI. I went to Australia after Cherokee and hung out and looked at a bunch of studios there. I went on a pilgrimage to Albert Studios where AC/DC recorded all their early stuff.

You got jobs in Australia working at studios?

No. It's a hassle to work over there, so I came back and I was looking at jobs. I went back to Cherokee and decided I didn't want to work there anymore. The Robb

brothers - I'd had enough. So then I went to A&M Studios and I worked there for three weeks. The studio sucked then. There was sort of a bad, lean-on-the-shovel attitude. I felt like everyone there was just collecting paychecks - I like to work. So I went to the Village Recorders, which is a nice studio. It was owned by Geordie Hormel. I worked there from 1984 to 1987. I'd gotten to know Jimmy Iovine and Shelly Yakus from the Cherokee days. They were working at Cherokee and we did the Tom Petty record *Southern Accents* and the Eurythmics [*Be Yourself Tonight*], one of those Talking Heads records [*True Stories*] with Eric Thongren engineering, Robbie Robertson's first [self-titled] solo record with Daniel Lanois and a lot of records with Gary Katz. Being a tech was nice because I didn't have to sit in the room all the time, but back then you were pretty involved in the whole process. I built my first mic pre while I was there. Tchad Blake and Mitchell Froom really liked it. Herb Alpert used to come there and hang out with Jimmy and Shelly a lot and I knew something was up. He asked Jimmy and Shelly if they could come and totally redo the studios at A&M. Shelly said, "If you come to A&M we'll make your salary ten times what it is here." I did go over there and my salary wasn't ten times what it was - maybe twice. The Village had changed management and there were a lot of drugs there at that time. It was kind of good [that] I got away from all that. So I went over to A&M and it was a great facility. That was a hot place at the time. I remember the U2 *Rattle and Hum* record - I still have the schedule from then, where every one of the five rooms and I think even the mastering rooms were booked with U2. It was mayhem, but it was really fun.

So you were building stuff?

I always built stuff for the studio. The mic pre was the first that was my personal brand - Little Labs. At A&M I got to know Bob Clearmountain really well. I built a lot of stuff for the rooms and for Bob personally. I left A&M in '97 after the company had sold. Polygram bought it and the whole thing changed - there was a lot of drama. I went to work at Conway Studios - Conway is a nice, beautiful place. The owner is a great guy - kooky, but great. Buddy Brundo - one of the few studio owners that has muscled it out over the years and managed to make a place profitable all these years, partially because he owns all the land. They made me chief tech there, which was cool. Right before 2000, I had been at Conway for a while. Being a chief tech is a pain in the balls - you are always on call. You could be out on a date and you get a call like, "Ron Fair's in here and the fucking automation just erased all of his files and he's pissed." I wanted to get out of that, so I left Conway. I met Lisa Roy - she really helped me out. She goes, "I'm a publicist." I really learned the value of a publicist from that. She gave me a super deal. For six months she tried to get me in every magazine. She did a great job, got the word out and the push I needed to be able to make a living solely as a manufacturer. I started doing the trade show thing then. I've been doing Little Labs and not working as a tech in studios since 2000, although between 2000 and 2003 I also managed Chalice Studios and built a mastering console (with EQ) for Marcussen Mastering.

Was it word of mouth? How were people were finding out about your gear?

Remember, I'm working with all of these big time guys like Neil Dorfsman, Shelly Yakus, Tchad Blake and Bob Rock - there's all kinds of people coming in and out of that place. Fred Bova, a great A&M tech, built a direct box for the Traveling Wilburys - it inspired me. That's when I started experimenting with a bunch of DIs. I made a whole bunch of different ones and I found that certain circuits sounded better on certain things. With my Multi Z [DI], people think you're just changing the input impedance on the thing, but you're not. They're actually different circuits set up for different *source* impedances.

Where did the PCP [Instrument Distro] idea come from?

Joe Barresi was one who wanted a re-amp function thing and then I started getting that whole concept of putting a splitter, a re-amp and a DI all together in one box. PCP stands for "Professional to Cheesy Pedal Interface". That came out while I was working at A&M.

A lot of your products are utilitarian, problem-solving products - re-amping boxes, splitters, the attenuation box [8810U8ERS], the STD and the IBP.

Well, the IBP [In Between Phase] - there was a Clair Brothers console that had phase correction on it and sometimes subwoofers had a phase correction. Countryman had a phase box as well, but they might have been prototypes. I called them once about it and they didn't know what I was talking about and anyway, it didn't sound good. What these early devices missed the point on is they had a lumpy phase versus frequency response - you could go in and out of phase as you went up and down the scale of an instrument. The IBP minimizes that. The whole concept of the IBP is what I originally talked about in that paper I wrote when I was 17. Back then I wanted to make a graphic equalizer that was phase versus frequency rather than an amplitude versus frequency graphic, because at that time everyone used a White EQ on their mains. I kind of forgot about it for a while. All of my initial experiments were with a simple feedback with an op amp - it always sounded like shit. My dad suggested that I do it passively. He showed me a bridge circuit. Damn it sounded good. What was cool about it was it lost 6 dB for every phase section on the thing. So you need gain makeup, and op amps typically sound better *with* gain than if you try them running at unity. I thought, "This could be a product." The IBP has done well for me. If there is anything I deserve credit for, it was the first commercial product to properly address the phase issue. People are addressing phase much more so than they did five years ago.

Now there's a plug-in version by Universal Audio for the UAD [powered plug-ins].

That's correct. Buy one! I get 10 bucks for every one you buy. **Did you work with them a bunch to design that?**

I didn't. I gave them one and I went up there. The guy who did it is [Dr.] David Berners [issue #69], who's super nice and really bright. I made sure that every position on the pot and every button position would null out when I put them out of polarity - it followed it perfectly.

It's also got a delay function as a plug-in.

They added that. You can slide the shit around anyway, but it does make it nice that it's there. I'm so naïve to the whole plug-in world. I guess you can buy one and you can have 100 of them. I was like, "What?" People have had a good response on that one. I think even UA was surprised how well they've done with that.

Has the physical IBP sold fairly well?

I've sold a lot of those. Then the piece off the PCP - I wanted a remote channel for the PCP and that's where the Redeye [DI, re-amp] came about. I've never really pushed that product at all and that has been my biggest seller. It was the easiest. You know when you build something and it's your first trial? It's like, "I've got to change that." With the Redeye the first time, "Boom, it works." It was like one of those afternoon things that was meant to be.

What about the Lmno pre mic preamp?

I should talk about the mic pre too. The mic pre is fucking great, man. One day there [are] going to be no more, and you are going to wish you had one. They are going to be collectors' items.

Are you going to stop making them?

I committed to 250 of them - I've got 100 more to go. **I should get mine autographed.**

Well, I'm not dead. I discovered some of my best ideas have been mistakes. I discovered a way to do a peaking high-pass filter so you can sweep between like 300 and about 20 Hz and put a fairly sharp peak in, and everything below the peak is basically wiped out. From the peak it's a 24 dB per octave cut. The Lmno mic pre has a primitive version of this on it, but the difference between the VOG [Voice of God] unit and the mic pre is that on the mic pre the frequency and peak amplitude changes depending on your gain setting. The way the VOG works is it's unity gain, and you can precisely control the frequency and peak amplitude. It's a lot easier to use and you can quickly dial in some pretty extreme bottom that's not mushy. What still fascinates me is you're able to do this severe cutoff and have this peak with a single pole filter. So you're going through one amplifier and it's not part of the feedback on the amp. It's a discovery that I made... maybe I shouldn't say all this? What's cool about this is that you can find the actual resonant frequency of the person's chest and you can get that proximity effect without having them spitting on the mic. You don't lose intelligibility. It's my first 500-series format because that's so popular, even though the fucking power supply situation in the 500-series sucks so much. It's also great for bass and kick drum. You fine-tune the punch. All the shit below it is just wiped out with the high-pass filter. For the longest time I thought it worked one way, and I modeled it on a computer and it didn't show up in what I was getting. What was showing up in the

model and what I built were two different things. I thought it was due to the high Q of the polystyrene capacitors I was using, but it turned out that's not what it is and I'm still not positive of what it is that's causing it. But I can build it and it works and it's totally repeatable. So that's my new product that I'm excited about - the VOG.

I like the name. A lot of your products have funny names.

Yeah. Let's all have a laugh. The PCP - I thought that was funny. When that first came out [engineer/journalist] Barry Rudolph said, "That's a terrible name. PCP has a bad connotation." People think of the elephant tranquilizer drug. But Marilyn Manson liked the name of it. Lmno pre came from Fletcher [ex-Mercenary Audio/now with Telefunken]. He goes, "You've got the Multi Z, the PCP, the STD. You should call it the Lmno." But then I learned from TV people that if there's a bad production, sometimes they'll put "LMNO" on the box. It means, "Leave My Name Off this." I was like, "Shit, maybe I should rethink the name."

It seems like a lot of pros are using your gear and they endorse it without you having to do anything.

Yeah, people get real evangelical about my gear and that's how the word has spread. I've always liked the music. If it wasn't for the music... You don't make a lot of money doing this. I do alright.

You're good friends with a lot of designers that work in the same field.

Oh yeah, I keep in touch. There are a lot of good people in the industry. Greg [Gualtieri] from Pendulum Audio is one. Dave Amels [Anamod, etc.] is probably the most brilliant electronic designer I have ever met, and I can pick his brain on stuff. I admire him. I know a lot of recording engineers too. After 2000 the business changed radically. It's just like *everyone* is a recording engineer. Everyone's like, "Oh, I know Pro Tools."

But that's good for you, because your product is being sold to people that have home studios.

Exactly. That's why I chose the right time to [leave]. Everyone has a studio and they get the shitty gear at first, and then as time goes on they get a little bit better stuff. The trouble is so many people are jumping on the bandwagon of being a "boutique" manufacturer - that part bugs me a bit. At least now I am considered one of the "old school" guys. I open a [magazine], "Why are these guys in Sweetwater and I'm not?" It's because these guys market the shit out of themselves and I don't. I've kept Little Labs *little* for a certain reason - because I don't want the headaches. What is the fucking point? What are we trying to prove here? I want to put good stuff out, but I want a life too. And I'm pretty good about a balance between the shit. It makes you a happier person. ☺

www.littlelabs.com (look for Jonathan's documentary at: www.soundstrips.com)