



REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Little Labs Pepper

This do-anything box for guitar recording can do, well, anything...



Jonathan Little is an inventor of little black boxes... in the most literal sense, as five of his current products share the same black metal DI-sized enclosure. Most reviews of Little Labs products include a comment about how they "solve common studio problems." I would like to amend this and say instead that Jonathan creates convenient solutions to modern studio tasks, keeping them from being problems at all.

In the case of this month's review of the Little Labs Pepper, those tasks include multiple facets of guitar recording. Pepper is billed as a Pedal/Pro/Instrument Blender/Direct Box/Re-Amp! What precisely does all that mean? Let's look!

A guided tour of the box... NOT

Usually this is the place in my reviews where I run through the layout, controls, and functions. Okay, fine. The Pepper has seven green backlit buttons, three knobs, a 1/4" instrument input and a 1/4" instrument output on its front panel. On its rear panel are six 1/4" ins and outs, one XLR socket, and a special locking power socket.

But what do they all do? In the case of the Pepper, doing the usual left-to-right faceplate tour is almost guaranteed to be more confusing than simply jumping into what the Pepper does. We'll come at this review from a function standpoint, and talk about the appropriate ins, outs, and controls as we do.

Outside and in

The Pepper and its very robust 16V linear bipolar external power supply come housed in a molded plastic hardshell case for easy transport and storage... although since getting this one for review, it has spent zero time resting in said case!

Internally Pepper makes use of the high-quality analog circuitry that Little Labs is known for. This includes fully differential amps, Vintage UTC style mu-metal shielded transformers on the instrument and the mic-level DI out, Panasonic relays, and more.



Pepper meat and potatoes

The Pepper is designed as central do-it-all routing hub for all of your studio guitar needs. As such, it is bit of a "Greatest Hits" of Little Labs devices, incorporating concepts and functions found in the Redeye 3D (reviewed in our July 2012 issue), the STD, and even the LMNOPre.

Expanding on Little Labs' description, the Pepper is:

- ~ a direct box
- ~ an instrument preamp
- ~ a reamplification box
- ~ a patchbay and blender for guitar effects pedals
- ~ a patchbay and blender for pro studio devices

Beyond all that, it has even more tricks up its sleeve. Time to learn about them...

Let's be direct

You start with plugging your guitar or bass into the left-side 1/4" input on the front. From there, the Pepper can be a high-quality direct box that can connect to a mixer or microphone preamp with the transformer-based male XLR output on the back. As with many direct boxes, there is also a front-panel transformer-equipped 1/4" output to connect through to your amplifier. This is just the beginning...

The Pepper is also a full-fledged line level preamp in its own right; it can send a non-transformered, balanced output direct to your DAW or recording device of choice. The signal comes out of the rear output labeled Pro TRS Out. It has 24 dB of gain with an adjustable Pro Send knob on the front and is dead clean and quiet.

I personally like this option a lot when I know the signal will be reamplified later; I have confidence that I am capturing as flat and honest a dry guitar sound as possible. Using one of my preamps might color the sound and often thickens the signal; that's great when direct recorded bass is all a track requires, but not so much when you want to re-amp as cleanly and accurately as possible.

Reamplification

Speaking of re-amping, doing so is as easy as sending the dry guitar signal out from your DAW into the rear-panel Pro TRS In and connecting your amp to the front-panel 1/4" Instrument output. Output signal level is handled by a Pro TRS Output knob.

For grounding hum and buzz problems, both the DI output and the Instrument outputs offer a button labeled Earth. These are ground lift switches and do their job properly; I always get grounding issues when re-amping, and these cleared everything up nicely.

Another handy feature of the Pepper in re-amp mode is a button which flips the polarity of the Pro Return. Using this in conjunction with the Pro Return knob, as well as the Instrument Thru knob (which is the master blend control between your instrument input signal and all other routing in the Pepper), you can flip the phase, turn the Pro Return knob, and when the signal drops out you know you have nulled the two signals. Return the polarity to normal, and you will have the proper gain level for re-amping. Sweet! There is also a Return Cut button which will cut/mute the incoming return signal from your DAW, should you need to do so.

Ohm my gosh

One other great Pepper feature is the ability to alter the load on your guitar pickups, depending on when you are using passive, active or even piezo pickups, all at the touch of a button. When set to Off the load is 10 Megohms, when On it is actually adjustable from 100 kilohms to 2.2 Megohms with a rear-panel recessed set screw. Little Labs recommends not messing with that set screw unless you have time to critically listen to the results.

Other companies have implemented similar designs; Radial Engineering calls it Drag Control, while guitar pedal manufacturer ZVex has a pedal entirely dedicated to stabilizing the resistive load of your pickups, called the SHO Pedal. I love this feature, and many guitar players tell me that it offers a feel and reaction adjustment in addition to being a sonic tweak.

Blending

The blending part of the Pepper is its pièce de résistance. You can hook up and loop your effects pedals through the unit via a set of rear-panel jacks labeled Pedal TS In and Pedal TS Out. By doing this, you can gain further sonic control and the ability to blend your effected pedal signal with your dry guitar signal. I have had a couple of purist guitar players in the past few weeks question why they would do this rather than just running the pedals into the amp, or into the Pepper's instrument input. It's all about control, versatility, and even signal purity.

As many engineers know, even though a full-blown distorted amp may sound great live or in the room, miked and in a mix it can be a different story. Often it can be too fuzzy, with a loss of definition of individual notes. By blending the distorted signals from your pedals alongside the pure amp tone, this parallel effects

process keeps the integrity and punch of the playing intact, while being layered with the effects pedals. This is especially effective on overdriven bass guitar.

This simple setup is also useful for using your effects pedals as line level effects in your DAW, essentially re-amping your effects pedals. Little Labs points out that using the Polarity/Phase flip here can be essential for checking you have the right level being sent to the pedals; beyond that, many guitar pedals have phase/polarity inconsistencies that we don't often notice when plugged into an amp until it's too late.

Using the Pro TRS In and Out described above in the section on tracking and reamplification, you can also patch in pro audio gear and use it as you would a guitar pedal. I tried it with an Empirical Labs Distressor, a Chandler Limited Germanium Compressor, and a Universal Audio 1176LN, and it worked well for a variety of tone shaping and compression tricks. This is only scratching the surface, as it can also be a cool way to blend in vintage rack-mount reverbs and effects units as well.

Both Pedal and Pro inserts can be hard bypassed at the touch of a button. You can even attach a foot switch to the back and use that to engage and disengage your effects.

Expanding one's horizons

The last feature of the Pepper, and the last output on the back, is the EXP TRS Out. This is a balanced line-level out; and besides feeding it to any line-level input, it lets you link the Pepper to a Little Labs Redeye 3D, allowing you to split the signal to a second amp, both live and when reamping. For larger guitar setups and even more extensive routing, it can be used with the Little Labs PCP instrument distribution box.

Also thanks to this EXP TRS Out, when used with the expansion input on Little Labs' Redeye 3D or PCP, you can use exceptionally long cabled runs to amps with no fear of signal loss. It's possible to create a networked setup of miked amps in one or more tracking rooms and/or iso booths and have them all connected to the same guitar with minimal sacrifice in quality and maximum flexibility.

Conclusions

I am going to go out on a limb and say this is possibly the best box Jonathan Little has ever come up with. If you do any sort of guitar tracking/reamplification, it is simply invaluable. It's close to double the cost of a good DI (including Jonathan's own Redeye 3D), but it does over half a dozen useful things and does them well. I see this little black box having a big future in my guitar sessions for years to come. 🎸

Price: \$660

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