



# Little Labs Pepper

Offering an interesting and flexible way of interfacing your box of guitar effects pedals with your recording rig (and vice versa) this little box adds some creative spice.

GEORGE SHILLING seasons his mix.

There are myriad DI boxes and related solutions on the market but Jonathan Little has designed the Pepper (UK£465 + VAT) to cover some of these with the highest possible fidelity. The front of the 'Preliminary Operators Manual' (it's a first draft) describes the Pepper as a pedal/pro/instrument blender/direct box/re-amp, which certainly suggests something of a Swiss Army knife approach. As well as this flexibility, Little has strived for the ultimate in audio quality with input stages normally found in high quality D-ACs, and components including vintage UTC style transformers (on the instrument and mic-level DI output) described as 'timeless gems'. They are also shielded in mu metal for hum rejection.

Arriving in a sturdy plastic carry case, nestled in the foam is the (approximately VHS tape-size but rather heavier) Pepper. Alongside is an inline power supply that is about as heavy as the Pepper itself. This has an IEC socket and, unusually, a Voltage selector switch — no cheap and cheerful 'switch mode' PSU here. Another point to note is the impressive thickness of the flying cable that goes to the Pepper, and its sturdy and expensive looking screw-ring clamp connector with four-pin socket that mates with the rear of the box. It's described as a 'beefy linear bipolar 16V power supply'! [insert manic-depressive joke].

On the front are the expected TS jack sockets found on any DI box for Instrument In and Instrument Out to link through to the amplifier, but here the latter is transformer isolated and accompanied by an Instrument Thru level knob. At about three o'clock there is unity gain. These sockets look particularly sturdy with metal securing nuts. On the rear panel is a (Neutrik) XLR socket for microphone level output — this was generous; I needed the pad on my API preamp. Also on the front are two further rotary knobs and seven illuminating pushbuttons, and a further six jack sockets on the back.

Four of the rear jack sockets comprise sends and returns for two FX loops, each independently hard-bypassed with buttons on the front panel. The first pair uses TS connectors which can interface conventional guitar pedals or an entire pedal board between inputs and outputs. The second (and that is the order of signal flow) is for pro level gear, using balanced TRS jacks. Another socket is for a TRS footswitch control to bypass these, making the Pepper



especially flexible in a live situation. A sturdy looking £15 Hosa dual footswitch is recommended by Little and this will separately control each insert. Using the aforementioned Instrument Thru knob lets you blend as much or as little of the clean guitar signal for parallel processing. Or you can turn it right down for conventional 'wet' pedal use. The remaining socket is an Expansion TRS output that sends out proper line level signal with no microphone preamp required. It can also be used to connect to the Expansion inputs on other Little Labs boxes like the excellent Little Labs PCP which cleanly feeds multiple amplifiers from one guitar source. An advantage of using this output is the ability to run long cables with no signal degradation. Of course, if you aren't using the Pro Return, then the Pro Send is also a transformerless line level output.

Another way of using the Pepper is to interface guitar pedals with pro gear. In this instance you'll hook up the pedals between the Instrument In and Instrument Out sockets, and use the Pro Insert to send and return from the DAW or other pro level device. The remaining two front panel knobs control Pro Send and Pro Return levels. There is +18dB gain available on the Pro Send (insert output) and up to +6dB available on the Return knob. Pro Return is effectively the 'wet' level for the pro insert. The Return Cut button mutes both insert returns, and there is a phase flip for the Pro Return. This is rather more essential than might be imagined as a remarkable number of guitar pedals reverse the polarity, (I have no idea why!) (And I suggest neither do some of the pedal designers. Ed.) Furthermore, you can match levels by nulling phase-reversed signals with the inserted gear; it's also great for ensuring accurate re-amping levels.

There are three further 'utility' buttons on the front. Load Off when pushed makes the Instrument impedance 10Mohms, but with it out this is variable from 100kohms to 2.2Mohms. This is factory set to

1Mohms but can be tweaked with a trimpot on the rear. The different settings are only audible on passive pickup instruments, and even then can be pretty subtle. With Load Off, my bright-sounding Telecaster was (almost imperceptibly) fuller-sounding and my Jazz Bass the tiniest bit woodier, although it gave my Crafter Mandolin's pick up a very noticeable upper-mid chime. The final two buttons are for DI Earth (for the mic level output) and Instrument Earth for chasing down hum problems.

I had loads of fun inserting pro gear in between guitar and amp. A highlight was cranking the Attitude to maximum Pentode on a Thermionic Culture Rooster, and dialling in huge EQ swathes for a magical warm and monstrous distortion tone that far outshone the inbuilt drive circuit in the transistor guitar amp I used. I also had fun with an old Lexicon PCM80, and the joy here is that there's no need to tamper with the Lexicon's mix settings as the Pepper provides Dry and Wet level knobs for the perfect blend of guitar and reverb (or chorus, delay, pitch effects...)

An equal amount of joy is to be had the other way round, using this as a guitar pedal interface for your DAW. This had me rummaging through pedals I hadn't used for a while. All sounded astonishingly clean and hifi when plumbed in with the Pepper, from ancient original Electro Harmonix gems like the Electric Mistress and wonderful rare Bad Stone phaser to Boss T-Wah and MXR Phase 90, and even distortion boxes like the Big Muff and Hotcake. The last of these was particularly good on drum loops, but guitar distortion needed high frequency filtering so as not to take out the tweeters! Some wonderful craziness ensued when I discovered that the Instrument Thru level becomes a Feedback control in this setup.

The inputs and outputs have other uses. Splitting a single guitar signal to two amps is possible by using the Pedal Send as well as the Instrument Output. And using the Pedal Return as a second guitar input (it's a fixed 1MOhm impedance) is also suggested for jamming or switching between two guitars. I even hooked up my stereo output ES-345 guitar to both inputs and using the phase reverse button found some interesting tones.

While there are other boxes that do similar things to the Pepper, none does all of them, and arguably no competitor achieves quite this level of fidelity, especially when interfacing guitar pedals with pro gear. The choice of components and build quality are clearly high-end, and this feels like a device you can completely trust in terms of reliability and sound quality. Great fun, highly recommended! ■

- PROS** Solves multiple problems in a small package with incredible fidelity.
- CONS** (Understandably) tiny legending
- EXTRAS**



The PCP instrument distro 3.0 is described as an engineer's toolbox for guitars, basses and vintage effects. A one-in three-out guitar splitter (five when using the mult and line driver) it features transformer-isolated guitar level/impedance outputs with phase reverse, ground lift, and level adjust on each output.

### Contact

LITTLE LABS, US  
Web: [www.littlelabs.com](http://www.littlelabs.com)