

Sonic Farm 2di4 Pentode Direct Box Review...

If you spend a decent amount of time on stage or in the studio, you may know that a good direct box (DI) is a bass player's secret weapon. Even though some engineers prefer to mic a bass cabinet, a high quality DI signal from the bass is immeasurably handy in both settings. While there is no shortage of decent and relatively inexpensive passive DI boxes, many players and engineers agree that a high quality active DI makes a world of difference in making your bass sound as good as possible. Sonic Farm may not yet be a household name among bass players, but the small Canadian company has garnered an impressive reputation, crafting exquisite studio gear for recording and mastering engineers for years. Their 2di4 tube direct box is not marketed or designed specifically for bass, but it's abundantly clear that the unit excels at generating killer bass tone. It's also well suited to seamlessly integrate into your stage rig with varying degrees of transparency, and signal routing flexibility. I was lucky enough to take the 2di4 for a spin on a handful of gigs and a couple sessions, and I'm happy to report that it's a bumper crop on the Sonic Farm (okay, just one farm pun, I couldn't help it).

The 2Di4 is housed in a very rugged steel enclosure and is rock solid. Every component clearly was chosen for its robustness, fidelity, or both. The shoebox-shaped chassis, painted bright red with cream lettering is hard to miss, and definitely got some "what the heck is that?" comments from other players and audience members. The volume knob, jacks, switches, and buttons all feel more than adequately sturdy and smooth, as do the 1/4" and XLR jacks.

While the 2di4 is relatively simple in its operation, there is some nuance to the way the controls function. There are a couple options for boosting the low and high EQ, in a subtle and musical but never 'over-the-top' way. Some may find this a little underwhelming as a tone-shaping tool, but in my opinion, these low/hi boost switches have a very effective, albeit understated way of bringing out the natural qualities of your bass. The gradual, wide slope of the low/hi boosts may be gentle, but there's no mistaking their effect when listening in the studio, or on the gig, in my experience anyways. 2 internal trim pots on the front panel allow for fine-tuning the amount of boost for each band (I favored the maximum gain/fully clockwise position). If you require powerful EQ and want to use this unit straight into a power amp, make sure you can get the EQ you need either on your instrument's active electronics, or some other unit in your chain with EQ (I recommend the Empress Para EQ for very accurate and powerful equalization in a small pedal form factor).

The most engaging feature of the 2di4 has to do with the triode/pentode switch on the front panel. Aside from the difference in output between the two settings (pentode is clearly a hotter signal), the tonal variation between the two settings allow for some nice variety. I found the triode setting to be fairly clean and neutral, with nice air and fidelity. The pentode setting on the other hand, is much more full-bodied with a stronger midrange push. At higher gain settings, it doesn't so much 'break up' as much as it 'opens up' with respect to harmonic richness and fullness. The pentode setting provided just the right amount of thickness to my sound, but retained plenty of articulation and definition. I've used both settings quite a bit, and I don't dislike anything about either one. They provide two good tonal options that complement the usefulness of one another. An upright player who I roped in for testing remarked that the Triode setting was great for his upright, due to its clarity and articulation, whereas the Pentode setting added warmth, fullness, and midrange complexity for electric bass.

There are a couple important things to know about the 2di4: 1.) You need to mute the unit before you switch tube settings (T/P) or else you get a loud "pop" when the button is depressed. It's not a huge deal, but it is important to remember, in order to avoid this loud popping sound through your speakers or front of house. 2.) The Low and Hi boost switches are overridden by the gain button, which adds 9dB or 5dB of gain (in Pentode and Triode mode, respectively) to the front end of the circuit. So if you have the unit set to add low and high EQ, and you hit the "Gain" button, the overall volume increases and the EQ controls are bypassed.

The result is less overall high and low frequency extension and tonal "width", and more midrange focus, relatively speaking.

As I mentioned in the intro, there are a few ways to integrate this unit into your stage rig. The 2di4 provides plenty of gain to use straight into a power amp, or in my case, the effects return/power amp input on my 900w micro head. For the most transparent operation on stage, I found the 1/4" "Amp" jack on the front panel to sound almost identical to plugging straight in to my amp, although the effect of the buffering in this output gives just a touch of sonic refinement to the dry signal. This output is ideal for those don't want to "mess with success" by altering what goes into the front end of their amp. However, the real magic lies within the dual XLR outputs on the rear of the unit. There are discrete "D.I." and "Line Out" XLR jacks, which both harness the lovely tube-ocity of the circuit, with the "Line Out" signal being noticeably hotter (Sonic Farm adds that the DI output was made with a console mic input in mind and has a 12dB step-down transformer to bring the level down from the line level). I found myself using one XLR line for my amp, and the other one to send to front of house/recording console.

This let me hear how the 2di4 was reacting through my stage rig. Note: Using the 2di4 in this way requires a special cable that has a female XLR connector on one end, and an unbalanced 1/4" on the other. (The 2di4 users manual helps explain exactly what type of cable is required for the various output configurations, and Sonic Farm responded that they are more than glad to steer customers in the right direction, as well as build customers the cables required for each individual's needs.) Comparing the 2di4 to plugging straight in to my Puma 900, the Sonic farm adds a level of richness, detail and articulation that reminds me of how a bass sounds after its been tracked and mastered: refined, balanced, full and taut, you get the picture...Recording direct into Protools HD, I was floored by how large and in charge the 2di4 sounded, especially in pentode mode. Without a trace of brashness or harshness, it was effortlessly present, warm and articulate. The engineer I worked with was quick to say that this was the best my bass has ever tracked (and this is in comparison to vintage API, Neve, and Universal Audio channels, not to mention some major bass preamp/DI contenders that I've hauled over there in the last few years).

So what's not to like? Well, you may say: "why would I buy a DI for this kind of money when my passive DI box works just fine?" And I would reply: "For lots of players, a passive DI is totally sufficient". Not every player/band/setting requires the level of finesse that the 2di4 delivers. Not every bass player needs a USA fender bass, some guys are just as happy with a Squier or similar budget-level instrument. It's not for me to say who needs what. What I will say is: if you've spent time, energy and money on crafting your ideal bass sound, there are few pieces of gear that improve and enhance the natural sound of your bass as well as the 2di4. Nothing I've heard offers the same level of balance and articulate warmth, not to mention the flexibility and build quality.

The 2di4 is priced at \$850 CAD (approx. \$690), which is by no means cheap, but for those who already have spent bundles of cash on a great sounding custom bass (or three), the Sonic Farm is one of the best methods of preserving and communicating the exquisite sound of your bass in the studio and on stage.

And if you consider yourself a tone-o-phile (like I do), you should know that the 2di4 is REALLY all that, and highly worthy of your consideration.

Check out Sonic Farm's website for more info www.sonicfarm.com



About Jake Wolf

Jake graduated from the Evergreen State College in Olympia WA, with a degree in music composition, recording, and performance. Jake resides in Asheville, NC where he gigs and records as a freelance sideman around the SouthEast, and also as a solo performer.