



AT A GLANCE SESSION ACOUSTIC DI

FEATURES

Active DI/preamp with
-12dB to +26dB gain

1/4-inch 10 Megohm
impedance instrument input

Two outputs:
DI and unbalanced line

Input gain and
output volume controls

Saturation and multiband
compression/EQ controls

Anti-feedback notch filter

Ground lift switch, mute
footswitch, phase switch, high
pass filter switchable between
40, 80, 120, and 200Hz

Powered by XLR Phantom
power, 9-volt battery, or external
power supply (not provided)

Battery check button

DIMENSIONS

1.5 lbs. 6.25 x 4 x 1.75 inches

PRICE

\$359 list/\$249 street

Made in USA
lrbaggs.com

Not Your Typical Stomp Box

LR Baggs Session Acoustic DI
puts studio magic at your, er, toes

BY DOUG YOUNG

Any acoustic guitarist who plays through an amplifier knows how frustrating live sound can be. You've got a great-sounding guitar, but as soon as you plug in, you're hearing the sound of a pickup that inevitably fails to deliver what your guitar is capable of. Although pickups have definitely improved over the years, manufacturers have also started to turn to electronics as a way to overcome the limitations of pickups and deliver more pleasing sounds. LR Baggs has been at the forefront of working to build both better pickups and better electronics, although their electronics offerings have focused on fairly traditional approaches—until now.

The inspiration for LR Baggs' latest device, the Session Acoustic DI, began when Lloyd Baggs and his team noticed that the studio recordings they made to promote their pickups always sounded surprisingly good. The Nashville

engineers they were using were clearly injecting some special magic, and the Baggs team began to wonder why they couldn't capture the processes they used and create the same sounds live. They focused on two somewhat complex effects that are commonly used in the studio recording and mastering process: saturation and multi-band compression, packing them into an easy to use preamp/DI.

COMPETITIVE CORE FEATURES

At its core, the Session Acoustic DI is a simple active direct box that combines a high impedance input with a line out (for amplifiers) and balanced XLR output for a PA, a gain control, mute switch and a notch filter for controlling feedback. The Session DI can run off a battery, an external power supply, or run off phantom power from a mixer. Rounding out the feature

set, a ground-lift switch helps eliminate hum, and a configurable high pass filter allows you to reduce unwanted low frequencies. All in all, the Session DI's core feature set is competitive with many other active DIs without even considering the extra signal processing.

STUDIO MAGIC

With the Session Acoustic DI, Baggs has distilled two fairly complex studio mastering tools down to two simple knobs. The easiest control to understand is called "saturate." Saturation is essentially harmonic distortion. As guitarists, we associate distortion with overdriven electric guitar sounds—not usually desirable for acoustic tones. But in small doses, distortion adds pleasing aspects to music: think of the "warmth" of a good tube amplifier compared to solid-state, or the analog sound of tape compared to digital recording. Turning up the saturate control on the Session DI has the audible effect of adding warmth and fatness to your tone in a way that is different than what you can get with EQ. It seems to produce an increase in the lower midrange in the 200Hz to 1KHz range and also appears to add complexity at higher frequency ranges. A little saturation goes a long way, and higher settings produce audible distortion, so just as in recording, you'll want to use the effect with care.

The second knob is called "comp EQ," and requires a little more explanation and experimentation. A studio multiband compressor basically consists of multiple compressors, each of which limit the dynamic range over a specific frequency range without affecting other frequencies. As implemented by the Session DI, the process acts like a dynamic EQ that tames spikes by cutting certain frequencies when you play hard, but leaving them untouched when playing quietly. Using multiple bands means that the effect can, for example, reduce harshness by limiting higher frequencies without affecting the guitar's bass response.

Studio multiband compressors can have dozens of knobs and be quite complex to set up properly. With the Session DI, there is a single "comp EQ" knob, but in reality there are two knobs that interact to control the effect. The Session DI's compressor/EQ has a fixed threshold—the level at which the effect kicks in and reduces the gain—but you can control the amount of compression by adjusting the gain control; basically changing how loudly or softly you need to play to activate the effect.

The "comp EQ" control determines the blend between the raw signal and the compressed signal, which affects how much effect you hear.

The audible effect of the comp/EQ is to smooth out your sound. The behavior seems

most pronounced in the upper midrange, between 1kHz and 5kHz, where the Session DI tames some harshness, while still retaining the bass and sparkling highs. The effect allows the warmth of the guitar to come through when you play softly, but prevents both a buildup of mud and limits the aggressiveness of the upper mids as you dig in and play harder.

SLEEPER EFFECT

In use, I found the Session Acoustic DI to be pleasant to play through. Both effects are quite subtle—this isn't a typical stomp box effect that you will switch on to radically change your sound. The overall effect is much like what happens when a mastering engineer puts the final touches on an already good recording—things just get a little bigger, fuller, smoother, and more polished. I found the benefits of the Session DI to be most noticeable when I used it for a while and then turned the effects off—it was most obvious that I missed what had been added after it was gone.

There is a bit of overlap between the saturate control—that tends to add fatness and lower mids to your sound—and the comp EQ that tends to tame the mids, at least when you play hard, so some experimentation with adjusting the gain, saturate, and comp EQ controls is called for.

When playing fingerstyle guitar, I enjoyed the added warmth of just a bit of saturation, and a little compression enhanced the way the guitar *felt* more than how it sounded. With heavy strumming, I had to be careful not to use too much saturation, but it was much easier to hear—and feel—how the comp/EQ smoothed out my sound. Although I did not try the Session DI with a band, I suspect it would help an acoustic rhythm guitar sit in the mix more consistently.

Part of the Session Acoustic DI's appeal is its simplicity. Some guitarists may be concerned about the lack of EQ and other features, but because the device offers its own way to sculpt your sound, you may not need additional EQ. Yet another option is to use the Session DI as an effect in conjunction with another preamp that provides other features. For example, inserting the Session DI into the effects loop of Baggs' Venue preamp allows you to use the Venue's five bands of EQ while adding the Session DI's saturation, and compression.

The Session Acoustic DI is a sort of "sleeper" effect. It's difficult to demo because it doesn't produce a clearly identifiable sound like a chorus effect or reverb.

The audience won't notice you're using it, but they may comment on how your guitar sounds just as good as a recording! **AG**