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### Amplifier Parts

### Effects : PreSonus Acousti-Q: Part I

Posted by Dan on 2004/5/23 1:26:00 (18801 reads) News by the same author

Acoustic guitars have always carried with them a mystique of sorts. The image of the lonely singer-songwriter playing in small intimate gatherings or the cowboy on the range. Those that can play them well are revered by even the most hard-core electric rockers. Even Zakk-Wylde has released an acoustic CD! In the modern era of music production - acoustic guitars are often recorded along with or even preferentially to electric guitars. The success of MTV's "unplugged" series has shown that people love the intimacy and emotion that can be expressed by the acoustic guitar.

An often used quote states that "necessity is the mother of invention" (it actually comes from the Republic by Plato - store that in your brain for your next cocktail party!) Although acoustic guitars can have an amazing orchestral quality, electric guitars were invented to solve a problem. That was that acoustic guitars were often drowned out in the mix when other, louder, instruments were added. Thus the magnetic pickup and hence the "electrified guitar" were born. The evolution of the electric guitar is the topic of an entirely different article; however, suffice it to say the inventors never stopped working on amplifying the acoustic guitar.

You can purchase magnetic pickups that use similar technology to that of an electric guitar pickup, piezo pickups that utilize the vibration of little quartz crystals (rather than magnets) to signal frequency changes, and of course the old standby - simply mic'ing the guitar. Each of these have their benefits and their drawbacks. Magnetic pickups cannot be used on nylon stringed (classical or Spanish) guitars and typically have limited frequency response. Piezo pickups have excellent frequency response but often lack in sound quality - with the often mentioned acoustic "quack". Mic'ing the guitar with a good microphone probably has the best sound reproduction, but is subject to external noise and is especially sensitive to feedback - sometimes a good thing for electric guitars, but never a good thing when playing an acoustic.

In order to enhance the good qualities of the various pick-up options for acoustic guitar and to minimize the negative effects, manufacturers have designed systems that attempt to combine the signals from various types of pick-ups. Theoretically then, you can then "blend" these signals into various shapes that are useful for the large stage with other instruments, for recording purposes, or even for the best sound possible when playing small venues. This last step has posed the greatest problem - what is the best way to blend these signals?

Let's be honest, the manufacturers of these blended pick-ups usually include a pre-amp and equalizer that is built into the guitar somehow - unfortunately these are rarely adequate for anything beyond the small club situation. For recording and band situations a more sophisticated solution is required.

Although there are many decent blenders on the market, the guys at Pre-Sonus were confident enough in their acoustic blender that they put it up for scrutiny under the microscopes of the GearHead lab!



Let's just put the good news up front. The PreSonus AcousticQ is an outstanding little unit. It basically works as a tube based pre-amplifier to enhance frequencies that would not normally be audible and a blender to combine signals from two microphone systems without generating extra noise. Here's an abbreviated feature list for the AcousticQ:

- 1) Dual input stage with two separate pre-amps.
- 2) Blender controls for mixing input signals.
- 3) 12AX7 tube driven output for warm analogue tone.
- 4) 12V Phantom Power.
- 5) Phase control.
- 6) Notch filter for feedback control.
- 7) Equalizer with separate controls for brilliance, midrange, and bass.
- 8) Master volume controls with separate out to amp/tuner.
- 9) Unbalanced and balanced (XLR) outputs.

Although this unit is relatively easy to use, I would suggest a pretty thorough read of the manual before you start to include this device in your effects loop or tweak the settings. There are a number of suggestions in the manual for getting the best sound with the device and effects loop schematics that will make your life a bit easier.

For additional specs and to read the manual yourself you can access the PreSonus AcousticQ page using the link below:

[http://www.presonus.com/acusti\\_q.html](http://www.presonus.com/acusti_q.html)

The first test I ran was a simple non-blended input from the piezo pickup on my Alvarez acoustic guitar. This guitar already has a top quality pre-amp system (the 600T) so I have to admit that I was a bit skeptical that this pre-amp was going to add anything to my sound. However, I must admit that I was able to shape my sound to a much greater degree with the AcousticQ than with the equalizer on the guitar - especially with regard to bass and treble.

The next phase of my test is where things really got interesting. This device is of its greatest use when the guitar has a dual pickup built into the guitar that outputs to a single 1/4" cable. Unfortunately, my Alvarez only has a piezo pickup. So in order to test the device I had to purchase a stereo splitter cable that accepted the signal from the guitar and a separate signal from a mic that I had in my studio that had a 1/4" plug.

This is my only beef with the unit. Since many guitars (like mine) only have piezo systems, it would be excellent if PreSonus would add an XLR input to this device. That way you could mic the guitar in a traditional way and run a mic directly into the unit without additional converters and cables. This addition would also provide the opportunity to use the AcousticQ as a voice & guitar blender for small venues.

Nevertheless, after some trial and error I was able to get my piezo/microphone set up working so I could test the blending functions of the AcousticQ. The bass, mid-range, and treble knobs worked similarly well in this mode and I found the blending knob to be incredibly useful in dialing in the perfect balance between piezo and microphone.

Incidentally - I used this unit with both my amplifier and with my recording device. I found the blending and equalizer functions to be incredibly versatile with respect to these uses. With my amp, I found that dialing up the bass a bit made my small bodied guitar sound more like a jumbo guitar without taking away any of its treble presence. With my recorder, I was able to dial down the treble a bit so that the high strings of the guitar didn't cut into the recording so much.

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With either amp or recorder I found that allowing the piezo pickup to assume most of the sound produced a nice clean tone without too much extraneous noise. I then brought up the microphone until the "quackiness" of the piezo was nicely rounded out, producing a very professional sound.

Now comes the time to tell you about my favorite feature! If you look in the picture above you'll notice that the AcousticQ comes with a stand. I have played with many small effects units and this is the first one I've seen include such a clever little device. This stand keeps the box elevated and angled upward so that all the knobs are easily accessible. This setup is perfect for putting the AcousticQ on your desk and using it as a direct-in box to a computer or recording device. Also, the base slides easily underneath top mounted amp handles or sits perfectly on top of most amps, allowing quick access to all the tone shaping power of the AcousticQ.

The astute among you will notice that this review is labelled as "Part I". During testing of this device we uncovered a secret use for this device. While most acoustics equipped with two types of pick-ups include at least some form of pre-amplification, many electric guitars now have piezo systems installed that can be combined with the traditional magnetic pick-up selections. In this case, very little pre-amplification or blending options are provided.

Because it is a tube-based pre-amp, we believe that this unit would provide a tone-busting option for these kinds of electric guitars! We'll be testing this theory in part II of this article. However, if you get to it before we do, please provide us your comments.

In conclusion, the only ding I can give this device is the lack of an XLR input for easy mic'ing. However, with some clever cable tricks you can accomplish a separate mic and piezo pick-up setup. Besides this minor issue, this device serves as an incredibly versatile direct-in box for recording or a tone shaping device and feedback eliminator for live playing situations. Furthermore, I expect that this device will prove to be even more versatile when coupled with an electric guitar with a piezo pickup.

Because of it's ability to fine-tune the blending of two sources and it's integrated 12AX7 tube design, I noticed that this unit produced a nice clean, rounded sound that you would expect to hear in a studio setting; however, exists in a sweet little compact box that fits nicely on any desk or amp.

For these reasons, the engineers at PreSonus have yet again earned a "GearHead Approved" award for the AcousticQ.



Daniel Halberg  
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