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# In The Doghouse

By Chris Fitzgerald

## Headway EDB-1

Every so often, I find I have a specific musical application in mind and think, "I wish somebody would invent a piece of gear that would do this." Sometimes, I never see that piece of gear, and it remains a "what if?" thought in the back of my mind. Other times, somebody does invent the piece of gear, and it either does exactly what I had hoped perfectly, or it turns out to be a complete disappointment. Still other times,

somebody invents the piece of gear that fills the function I wanted, but I end up using it for something else entirely than what I envisioned at first. The Headway EDB-1 falls into this last category.

In this case, the specific application I had in mind was a device that would blend the signals from a mic and a pickup together to allow me to amplify a double bass through a stage amp. The device I had in mind would have the following features:

- 2 channels with independent volume controls
- More than 3 bands of EQ

- Warm, natural, and articulate preamps
- Small and light enough to fit in the pocket of a bass bag
- Choice of XLR or 1/4" inputs on the second channel
- Phantom power on the second channel, in case the mic was a condenser
- Ground lift for sending to the main PA
- High pass filter (more about this later)

Such a device, I reasoned, would enable me to mix a mic and a pickup into virtually any amplifier I happened to be using, whether it be my own amp for gigs around town, or whatever backline I was supplied when traveling. Understandably, when I saw the specs of the Headway EDB-1 and started hearing the first reports coming in from early users, I was extremely interested in trying one out.

Once I had the unit in hand, I found that it did indeed do everything I was hoping for, but there was one small thing keeping me from using the unit as I intended; something that had nothing at all to do with any drawback with the unit itself. My regular amp, the PJB Super Flightcase, needs to be sitting on the floor/stage in order to take advantage of its design for bass response. In my experience, mixing a mic and a pickup only really works if the speaker can be placed in such a way so that it is "invisible" to the mic – which means that the speaker needs to be either above the level of the mic, in front of it, or both to be effective and reduce the risk of feedback issues. This obviously wasn't what the Flightcase was designed for, so I feared that the Headway, which had



exactly the feature set I was hoping for and sounds great, would be superfluous, in spite of all the great features.

As it turns out, I was wrong, but not in a way I would have expected. While I found that I wasn't able to use the Headway unit to blend a mic and pickup through my amp (it does function beautifully as a blender in other configurations, however – more on this later), it still serves as a wonderful Swiss army knife type of device that is incredibly useful, even without the blending capability. First, it is useful as another preamp voicing for any rig that for whatever reason isn't getting the right sound in a particular room or setting. I love the dark warmth and thickness of the PJB amp in about 8 rooms out of 10 that I play. In rooms that are very reflective and boomy, however, it can be a bit too dark and undefined, and that warmth and thickness turns directly to mud, leaving me with very few options other than to cut a ton of bass and muddle along with a thinner sound than I normally like.

Enter the EDB-1. I won't pretend to understand or care about the tech-speak that gets thrown around about "class-A inputs with two FET stages" or "amplifies the upper partials like a tube amp," but I will say that the voicing of the Headway preamp is very clean and hi-fi sounding, with a clarity of presence in the mids that isn't there on many bass amps. For many rooms, I don't need this or even really want it (in which case I can dial it back on the EQ). But for boomy rooms, this voicing is a godsend, and it allows me to cut through a mix and hear myself in a way that I couldn't do with the regular preamp voicing. It makes the mids and highs more articulate, and seems to put some extra focused center in the sound that wasn't there before. Like any color, it has its strengths and weaknesses, and in very dry rooms, the sound can be a bit

bright for my taste with the double bass. But in boomy and muddy rooms, that clarity is more than worth the price of admission, and a valuable tool to have in the gig bag.

Second, the Headway unit shines as a portable preamp that can be used to get a good sound out of a substandard amp of the sort that traveling bassists get stuck with from time to time. At the university where I teach, the bass amps range from "basically okay, but not great" to "truly awful for double bass, but better than no amp." In all cases with amps of this type and range, I was able to dial in a much better sound with the EDB-1 as the front end than I was able to get using the preamp of the amp itself. This has led me to use the Headway pre along with an old Polytone for all but the most important university performances, and has allowed me to get away with a lot less schlepping of heavy gear when I don't need my absolute "A Team" gear to fulfill the function of the performance, but still want to sound good. For me, this function alone makes the unit worth the price.

As a blender – the original function I foresaw when I first heard of the unit – the EDB-1 does exactly what it's supposed to and sounds good doing. While I haven't used it this way in a performance because of the issues I described earlier, I have used it to send a blended signal to the front of house in a boomy room, and the results (by all accounts) were stellar from out front – clear, detailed, natural, and articulate. I took the line out into my amp and kept it far lower than I normally would have in order to avoid feedback. While I would like to have had more stage volume in that instance, everything worked out just fine. I have also plugged the Headway unit into a powered monitor in my music room at home and gotten very usable results, although I notice that the output of the mic in channel 2 is not

nearly as strong a signal as the pickup in channel 1.

If I were ever to use the EDB-1 for blending in a live scenario as my one and only means of amplification, I would do it in the following way: take a powered full-range speaker (like a powered PA speaker) or a speaker cabinet that can be mounted on a pole so as to get it up and over my shoulder, and send the blended signal to the elevated speaker. I used to do something similar with an Acoustic Image Focus head and an EA VL-208 cabinet, and the results were really superb. The sound was a little more airy and ambient than what I have now, and a little more prone to wolf tones due to the mic (see my previous articles in the first three issues of *BGM* for details), but worth it if you don't mind the schlep (which was about twice as complicated than what I currently carry). In the end, the issue of "to blend, or not to blend?" is always a choice, and it's nice to have so many options these days, isn't it?

In conclusion, the EDB-1 is a great multi-purpose tool to have in the toolbox, especially for those who occasionally play in boomy rooms with their own amps or who find themselves having to use various house amps on the road. With it, you can find a decent sound with just about any halfway decent amp and carry that capability with you wherever you go. For those who blend a mic and a pickup and have the physical logistics of that covered, the unit will allow a lot of options, like powered PA speakers to become a possibility that may not have been practical before. Well worth the price (MSRP \$349, street prices found online between \$290 and \$320 as of this writing). A hearty two thumbs up!