

TAPE OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

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Radial Engineering EXTC 500-series guitar effects interface

My wife: "How was your day, Honey?"

Me: "Oh, it was awesome. I ran the lead vocal of this song I'm mixing through a cool fuzz pedal made for bass and an analog delay made for guitar and cranked up the repeats until it went *whomp whomp whomp bzzzzzzzzzzzzringggggggg.*"

Wife: "How is that different from yesterday?"

Me: "Usually, you can't do this because guitar pedals don't work with recording gear. Line-level is different from..."

Wife: "Uh huh." Blank stare, slight smile, space drift. "I'm glad you're excited about it. It sounds neat."

For the record, my wife is awesome and supportive of me in all ways, but she has no idea how cool it is that I can do this! Using guitar stompboxes alongside my outboard rack gear during mixing? This is just simply good news.

Like many *Tape Op* readers, I came to recording and producing through playing in bands. And, like many, the gear habit started early with the collection of stompboxes. Delay, fuzz, phase, wah, compression, filters, etc. — and over the years, all the many flavors of the aforementioned — ended up on my shelves. Many of these boxes are still used frequently in tracking, and up until recently, that was their sole purpose.

Enter the Radial Engineering EXTC. This 500-series module allows you to interface guitar/bass effects pedals into your recording and mixing rig by converting a balanced line-level signal to a guitar-level effects loop, and back again to balanced line-level. It boasts Class A circuitry and is transformer-isolated for quiet and clean operation. (For those readers not yet invested in 500-series, Radial also makes a standalone version about the size of large DI called the EXTC-SA.)

The front panel is simple and well laid out with 1/4" jacks for connecting pedals to the EXTC; send and receive level controls; a wet/dry blend knob; and a polarity-reverse switch. The latter is a necessity because many stompboxes invert the signal at output, requiring you to un-invert the signal in order for the built-in wet/dry blend feature to work properly. Moreover, if the EXTC is mounted in one of Radial's Workhorse 500-series racks [*Tape Op* #85, #92], an additional effects insert loop (wired in series) is available on the rack's rear Omniport. Mine is in a BAE frame, so I have not used this feature. As with all Radial gear, the EXTC is sturdy, its knobs feel good to turn (with just the right resistance), and the jacks feel solid.

It is not what this unit does, but what it allows you to do. And for me, it has facilitated creative fun into many a session

and mix. I love the idea that what we do — as producers, engineers, and facilitators of recording — is capture and document moments in time. Sure, there are always those days of take after take, endless editing, band dramas, blah blah blah; but when that moment happens, and the tape is rolling, it is a glorious feeling. You have captured human musical spirit. If we allow for and insist that these unique moments occur and are part of the recording and mixing process, we transfer an individual's personality to a fixed medium.

Plug-ins are a great convenience and many of them sound just fantastic, but I sure have a lot more fun turning a real knob to increase the repeats into mayhem territory on an old analog delay pedal that was meant for guitar and is a tad dusty from sitting lonely on the shelf but is now on the lead vocal. It is the simple integration of analog effects and their inherent anomalies that add an element of "divine intervention" to the process. It makes beautiful the combination of practiced skills and chance. If you do not own a vintage Maestro Echoplex, Binson Echorec, or other analog tape delay, here is an opportunity, at a fraction of the cost, to add some of those unrepeatably "magic moments" to your mix using your old Ibanez analog delay pedal, for example.

I have found myself especially drawn to using guitar pedals for vocal effects — wah as a filter for background vocals, phase pedal on a shadow vocal double — and "performing" echo and delay effects is of course super fun. The options and odd combinations of source and effect are infinite. Did I mention how beautiful a SansAmp Bass Driver DI pedal sounds on a snare drum or toms? Try your software drum machine through a Fuzz Factory and your Whammy pedal. You get the idea.

On a recent session for NYC artist Charlene Kaye, I leaned heavily on the Radial EXTC to integrate fuzz and overdrive pedals on vocals and keys. Some of the songs called for a tough, blown-out vocal sound, and after trying a variety of things to find the right blend of clarity and grit (an SM57 through an AC-30; Decapitator and SansAmp plug-ins; a heavily driven Altec 1567A), we landed on integration of a 3Leaf Audio You're Doom fuzz pedal using the EXTC. In this case, I then printed the effected vocal to another track, performing slight changes in the amount of saturation on certain phrases, and used it alongside the cleaner vocal.

Some of the keyboard performances on Charlene's demos were deemed the best for use in new versions, but these were created using software synthesizers and were just a bit flat and lacking in life. The magic bullet? Again the 3Leaf Audio You're Doom was the small black metal box for the job (referring to size and shape specifically here, although I am quite certain that this pedal would be appropriate for very large Black Metal too). It offered just the right amount of buzz and fatness to put some meat on the (synth) bone. Some of the dirt-generating plug-ins were close, but the use of the outboard analog device simply felt better and connected on an emotional level that the digital did not. This guitar pedal was not intended by its creator to be used in this manner, and yet it yielded fantastic results as a vocal and keyboard treatment, and took yours truly down a path away from old habits and go-to's.

At the end of the day, I just added seven overdrives, six delays, two envelope filters, a ring modulator, a PLL, and many other once-lonely effects pedals to my tone-shaping arsenal. Cost? No idea, I bought many of these pedals between the ages of 15 and 30. The point? I am now using them again frequently and in ways that are bringing fresh life to mixes and fun to the process of creating music — thanks to the Radial Engineering EXTC. (\$249 street; www.radialeng.com)

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