

# BEAR HUG

ACOUSTICS GO DIGITAL WITH THIS INTERESTING MODELLER FROM DUNCAN TURNER ACOUSTIC RESEARCH. PETE CRISP GETS A BIG WARM HUG FROM MAMA



**D-Tar may not be the most well-known name to many readers of GB, but break the moniker down into its component parts and you soon realise the Californian company has something of a stellar pedigree. Seymour Duncan – ‘D’ for Duncan – has spent the past 30+ years building a sturdy reputation with a diverse range of pickups that provide the voice for an innumerable number of guitars. But what of the ‘Tar’ bit? Well, that’s ‘Turner Acoustic Research’ founded by Rick Turner, who has an equally impressive, if not as immediately obvious, heritage.**

Turner was, among other plaudits, a co-founder of Alembic and one-time Gibson R&D guru, and he has also spent a considerable amount of time

designing and manufacturing piezo pickups. Put them together, and what do you get? The first fruit of their collective design loins is Mama Bear, a ‘digital acoustic guitar preamp’ in the words of D-Tar. It is, in fact, quite a lot more than that, offering 16 modelled acoustic guitars that the company claims will bring the natural tone back to your acoustic, using what they call Acoustic Guitar Emulation technology, AGE for short.

## CONSTRUCTION

There may be what amounts to a rather nifty little computer lurking within the Mama Bear, but D-Tar has given the outer vestiges the look of a unit that is most definitely analogue. Perhaps housing the internal machinations in a 19-inch rack chassis would have made Mama Bear a tad more user-friendly in the →

## GBINFO



### D-TAR MAMA BEAR

PRICE: £289

BUILT IN: China

TYPE: Digital acoustic guitar preamp

FEATURES: 16 target instruments, 16 selectable input sources, blend, bypass, mute, phase reverse, lo-cut filter, unbalanced 1/4-inch jack output, balanced XLR output

POWER: External 16VAC power supply (supplied)

DIMENSIONS: 69(h) x 159(d) x 216(w) mm

WEIGHT: 1.2kg

#### CONTACT:

Aria UK Ltd

PHONE: 020 8572 0033

WEB: www.d-tar.com

■ Compact, yet packed with features, Mama Bear will fit perfectly in any studio or live rig



**"IT'S DESIGNED TO BE UPGRADED WITH NEW MODELS, WHEN THEY BECOME AVAILABLE"**

studio, but we just love the funky cream 'n' green colour scheme and curvy lines. If anything detracts from the vintage feel, it's probably the rather modern-looking knobs on the front panel, but maybe a set of chicken heads would have been just a bit too retro, for such a modern product.

Looking past the aesthetics for a second, the knobs – especially the one that's used to select the modelled sounds – could be labelled a little more obviously, as the numbered legend

requires you to return to the supplied preset sheet to ascertain which setting you're on. Perhaps printing the settings on the lid of the unit might help. That said, once you've been using Mama Bear for a little while, you'll probably gravitate towards your favourite sounds and stick with them, meaning very little tweaking.

Connectivity is about as basic as you can get, with a single front-mounted 1/4-inch input and two outputs on the rear, which comprise

a 1/4-inch unbalanced jack out, plus a balanced XLR. The advantage of the two outputs is that you can feed, say, an acoustic amp and a front-of-house mixer simultaneously; or have a low noise, low-impedance output for recording duties. A tuner out would have completed the picture nicely, but as it stands you'll need to make separate provision for that.

**FEATURES**

We get so used to vast preset counts and intricate configuration with gear these days that it's refreshing to find a piece of equipment

that offers such a pared-down set of controls as Mama Bear. Two of the five pots look after input and output levels, the latter redundant if you're using the XLR out to send a balanced signal to a PA or recording desk. This seems a little odd perhaps, but it's normal practise with a DI box, where the level will normally be set using the desk input gain. In our tests, we found the input pot had to be wound up almost full most of the time to achieve a decent input level, meaning guitars with a low output may end up suffering somewhat.

In between these controls sits the 'blend' control that, as its name implies, enables you to balance the original pickup tone of your guitar with the selected model. If you need to bypass Mama Bear, one of three push buttons make it an easy task, with the adjacent mute button silencing the output completely; very handy when unplugging a guitar. The third button is a little more



■ Acoustic undersaddle, electric guitar piezo bridge, magnetic soundhole pickups... all in here please

interesting: push it in and the output signal is flipped in its phase. This is used to help minimise the onset of feedback when using the Mama Bear through a PA or amp.

Mama Bear's most interesting features, of course, are the 16 modelled acoustic guitars, selectable using the right-most pot. But before you get to those, it's neighbouring 'input source' selector is vital in getting the most from the sounds. This also offers 16 positions, for you to 'tune' Mama Bear to the type of pickup in your guitar. D-Tar reckons almost any UST (undersaddle transducer) or piezo system will work with the unit, but not a microphone or soundboard transducer. In addition, there are settings for magnetic soundhole pickups and solid metal piezo saddles like you'd find on a solidbody electric with a Fishman PowerBridge or Baggs X-Bridge; like a Parker Fly for example.

Most of the selections are coupled, offering a choice between a flat EQ response or one with the mids

scooped out. Unfortunately, the otherwise well written manual gives no indication as to the frequency range cut, which may be helpful to some. The same is true of the analogue low-cut filter that sits directly after the input in the signal chain. Both of these EQ options work intuitively and effectively, however; the low-cut in particular is great for taking out annoying boominess in tone that just gets lost/confusing in a full band mix.

**SOUNDS**

D-Tar has gathered together some real gems to form the 16 guitar presets in Mama Bear. You have small-bodied blues and parlour guitars – some dating from the late 1920s and early '30s – right through to dreadnoughts and jumbos. These were all recorded originally for Mama Bear's AGE algorithms. There are also slightly more exotic instruments in the shape of a 'gypsy jazz' guitar (something like a Selmer Maccaferri, though specific

**TARGET INSTRUMENTS**

THE 16 GUITARS INSIDE MAMA BEAR

- Parlor
- Small Body Fingerstyle
- Small Body Blues
- Mahogany Orchestra Model
- Rosewood Orchestra
- Boutique Fingerstyle
- Slope-shouldered Dreadnought
- Grand Auditorium
- Slope-shouldered Jumbo
- Mahogany Dreadnought
- Rosewood Dreadnought
- Super Jumbo
- Hollow Body Archtop Jazz
- Gypsy Jazz
- Biscuit Blues Resonator
- Tricone Resonator

models are not quoted), and a pair of resonators also add variety to the collection. To test them, we used a cedar-topped Simon & Patrick with a B-Band undersaddle transducer as our main guitar, quite bright and tonally even on this particular acoustic.

The most obvious place to start is to use the most appropriate input setting – preset 7 according to the manual – and winding the 'blend' control to give only the emulated output. With the unit bypassed at first, the S&P sounds as you'd expect from a UST pickup; plenty of attack and quite zingy. Bringing Mama Bear into play and set to give a 'dreadnought' emulation, the change in tone is nothing short of drastic. You quickly realise how flat the dry tone is, as Mama Bear imparts not just a genuinely woody tone to the sound, but also air and ambience that places you away from the instrument. There's a natural aspect to the sound that gives the impression you're listening to the guitar without the harshness of amplification. ▶

**"D-TAR HAS GATHERED TOGETHER SOME REAL GEMS FOR THE 16 GUITAR PRESETS"**

**GETTING TECHY**

MASTERING MODELLING

■ Mama Bear's guitar emulations have been modelled after recording the original, real instruments, for the most part using a pair of high-quality condenser microphones, and analysing the results.

We get used to a lot of quirky technical terms when dealing with gear these days, but Mama Bear's '3-D EQ', as D-Tar calls it, does indeed impart a sense of placement of sound that a piezo or UST (under-saddle transducer) is never going to achieve. D-Tar includes 'correction in phase and time artefacts' as well as 'redressing frequency imbalances' as the reasoning behind the unit's striking sounds.

Also worth a mention is the fact that Mama Bear is designed to be upgraded easily with new models, as and when they become available.



**DETAILS**

A VERY STRONG CONTENDER FOR THE VERY BEST IN DIGITAL ACOUSTIC GUITAR SOUNDS YET



■ The 'blend' pot enables you to mix the D-Tar's sound with your unsullied pickup



■ A low-impedance, balanced XLR out is best for hook-ups to a desk or recording console



■ 16 choices x 2: one knob for inputs, and the other for the desired guitar models



**"IT GIVES ACCESS TO EXQUISITE ACOUSTIC GUITAR TONES"**

**GBOPINION**

**D-TAR MAMA BEAR**

**GOLD STARS**

- ★ Very natural sounds
- ★ Excellent models
- ★ DI output

**BLACK MARKS**

- Knobs and labelling could be better
- No tuner output

**IDEAL FOR...**

Refreshing the direct acoustic parts other modellers cannot reach

The different body sizes are quite revealing too, the smaller blues types definitely harking back to emotive, Robert Johnson-style bark and cut. We also love the 'super jumbo' setting (presumably based on a Gibson J-200 or similar), with all its resonant depth best heard through headphones, to cut out the un-amplified sound of the guitar. This introduces another point of interest, where blending some of the original sound into the emulation gives rise to a myriad of interesting tonal changes, giving you a huge amount of control over your final sound. Add to that the fact that changing the input source can dramatically alter the tone as well, and you realise there's a huge amount of variance to be had from just a few controls.

Recorded direct for a somewhat more detached viewpoint, it's surprising just how authentic the emulations sound, even the resonators, for example, sounding



■ Mama Bear is voiced for 16 different pickup types at the input stage

right on the money when played with a slide. For the ultimate test, even an ultra-budget roundback with a frankly rubbish pickup yields a reasonable tone using Mama Bear, though best results are definitely had from an acoustic of reasonable quality and a decent pickup.

**GBRATINGS**

**D-TAR MAMA BEAR**

BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★☆
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
<b>GBVERDICT</b>	★★★★★

**GBCONCLUSION**

A GOOD ROUTE TO AUTHENTIC ACOUSTIC SOUNDS FOR LIVE OR STUDIO USE

■ We've been mightily impressed with Mama Bear, right from the first moment we heard it doing its thing. Not just because it gives you access to some exquisite acoustic guitar tones and is such a simple unit to operate, but equally because the overall tone you get is unnervingly - not to mention excitingly - natural at times.

There are undoubtedly areas that could do with a little improvement, specifically the 'input source' and 'target knobs' would especially benefit from being larger and better labelled. Likewise, the mute switch is a thoughtful addition, though if it was coupled with a tuner output it'd be even better. These are small gripes however, considering the incredibly authentic sounds available from within the funky little chassis. If you're struggling for good, plugged-in acoustic tone, try one out now. **GB**