

Double Drive Review

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Before you read: I'm a guitarist in North Texas and just happened to come across Siegmund a year ago googling tube buffers. I think I might have heard of him in distant echoes before then but that was when I really looked into it. This is just honest talk from someone who appreciates authentic, quality, professional gear. Maybe it will help someone out there find his or her way to a higher plane of musicality, maybe not.

I've had my eye on Siegmund for a while. I have bought several sets of speakers from him and learned about his products. Fantastic response time, customer service, and passion for sound... It is rare to find someone that is in business for himself in a top quality tier that sells products at real prices and delivers on all fronts in any field – but especially today's music world.

I'm writing this to give you an idea of what it's like to have a Double Drive. If you're like me you'll look all over the Internet and find 1-2 clips and a few great reviews but wonder why there is not more information. I'm still scratching my head as to why more people don't have these. When I got it I put up a really nice photo on Facebook and a couple guitar groups and forums. A few tubeheads got excited about it but in general it flies under the radar. Too bad for those people, they don't realize what they're missing. We live in a world where if you don't scream the loudest you don't get noticed and honest work looks too good to be true – that is the nature of this age and sadly a consequence of that is losing hidden geniuses like Chris to larger companies. If you're in the mood for an interesting back-story read up and check out the site. I think it's amazing anyone can not only find these old field coil speakers, tubes, and electronics (that they're even still out there), but also find them in a condition to be used as state of the art gear. In addition to that to operate in a state of total understanding and fluidity when crafting gear for clients is remarkable to think about.

The first thing I can say about the Double Drive is that, no exaggeration, I was astonished the first day I got it. I didn't mess with the EQ or Gain at all. I just simply used it as a preamp and played with the power supply. You can get a very old sound dialing it back to low that's really, really fun. If I had a telecaster, that would be heaven. I'm still not sure what voodoo is contained within the unassuming box that is situated between the power cord and locking power line, but it is really helpful for me in dialing up headroom versus the feel of tone. On shows I tend to run it all the way on high because my 6L6 Fender power section is rather tweedy and I'm playing a Les Paul P90.

I also do engineering, and when I cutout my preamp (the weakest part of my signal path) it was like upgrading from 300 dollar studio monitors to 2,000 dollar Focals or something. This is the way to live life, with your ears open. I discovered in asking him about how that works is that many preamps are designed to change the original source into their sound and have no loyalty to purity. There is more to that but it's beyond the scope of this write-up.

So with this natural sound that allows you the player to be a more expressive musician and have more rewarding tools you can hear exactly what it is that you haven't been able to nail down before. Now I write all this knowing that until you experience this Double Drive that you will honestly not fully comprehend what I am telling you, you will only abstractly understand my words. This thing is so beyond, it feels like it's simultaneously from the future and past. It seems like progress would lead people to building tools like this, but it also feels like a piece of ancient technology that was somehow lost or forgotten in the mayhem of the 60s and 70s – not that I would know, I'm 27. Maybe that's scary in hearing you won't know what I mean, like it would be too obscure or esoteric for regular use – that's not the case at all. It is like carrying tension in your back for years and coming out of a massage with more openness.

So anyway, with this revelation you will undoubtedly find yourself arriving at the EQ section after playing with it a few weeks flat. What does it mean to have a “highly usable” EQ? This. This right here is what it means to have a highly usable EQ, until you use one as simple but well engineered and mapped out as this you will not know. Sweeping the knobs back and forth you can hear the treble just adds definition. It goes from super dark and smoky to rock hard definition. None of these are bad, but at lower volumes I tend to have just a little more than unity. At higher volumes I lower it down to match that. The middle control is really fun as well. All the way down it is a scooped sound, but don't think “scooped”. It's a very palatable sound that's a bit smaller and very funky. I just roll it up at shows until I feel like I'm forward enough with my core tone. With the bass and mid all the way down and treble at unity its 1/16th note funk rhythms for days. The more you roll the middle up the more that closed down funky sound opens up. It doesn't necessary bloom that's what the gain sections do, but it just brings it out. I usually run it on 10 for rhythm and lead and shape the bottom and top end around that. The bass is great because I can cut out the muddy nature of my Les Paul and get a very balanced sound. It gives you a lot more headroom. When you want a really fuzzier sound though you just engage both gain stages and roll the bass up and that's really cool too. They just have perfect overlap and a great range but each part of the sweep you can hear what it's doing. The bottom end is plenty yet sculpted, the mids are there in the most balanced way, and the highs are definitive yet easy. There is a natural air and presence when you dial it in like there is nothing blocking the sound.

On to the gain stages – I still don't understand the 3 gain stages. I guess in the first one there are two. When I got it I thought I would have the master volume with the preamp, then one switch to boost, then one to overdrive. That is not the case. The Volume and Gain knobs work together to set it, and then the drive is a 2nd switchable on top of that. You could get a custom one though if you needed another channel.

Update: I just leave master volume all the way up for preamp and roll gain on to taste, then I adjust the drive section for boost. The first section is clear and open and when you engage the drive it becomes thicker, fuzzier/woollier, and more spongy with top bloom. Back to original commentary...

I like that the gain and drive channels are distinct. The gain has it's own character and then the drive engages on top of that to create a fuller, woodier, rounder, more harmonic and compressed sound. I usually set the master and gain to where I want it and the Drive as a slight clean boost. Then I use my volume knobs on my guitar to control how much I want to push my power section. It has worked really well so far.

As far as the unit itself goes, the construction is fantastic as well as the appeal and I have definitely grown attached to this thing. I very much look forward to ordering a Missing Link which I'm told has a bit more purer sound and a custom preamp so I can play with these things in all sorts of ways. The enclosure is wonderful, feels great, very strong, and looks fantastic. I love the finish. When it gets dirty it gets dirty in a way that it looks like a photo-shopped ad for Harley Davidson or something. It does grime well.

This thing really functions like a world-class preamp. You really don't need anything more complicated than this unless there are specific functions you require, in which case I would recommend a custom one. I've really enjoyed playing shows with it so far; my Les Paul has much more clarity and musicality.

Update: A year later I want a custom preamp so I can use this as dedicated drive channel. I like it so much both ways!

One thing that impressed me about these micro tubes and this design is that you can really lay into this thing and let it wail when the songs work up and the trebles are never harsh. They may be gloriously radiating into the room with washing waves of brightness but you will enjoy it very much. I'm not used to trebles being so tangible in that manner, it's always been a battle of restraining the ice pick. Now I can have definition from the trebles and openness from the mid and bloom from the drive without having ice pick, overly muscular raunch, and too crunchy of a clean sound. The drive here works really well to sound clean and dirty at the same time. It retains your sound so well you can get more gain etc. without feeling like your playing so dirty. It gets plenty dirty though if you want.

I never realized how much different my pickups on my Les Paul sounded. They are Single Coil For Humbucker from Lollar. Both of them have a much more distinct identity now and the middle hum canceling position sounds less bland.

My experiences with buying speakers from Chris and this double drive very much make me look forward to the day when my finances and needs dictate another order. I've got my eye on a Sound King, Vibrolux, Tweed Twin, and JTM45. Honestly if you find another source that's better than Siegmund, let me know. I don't think it gets any better than this. He is the hidden gem for guitarists, vocalists, bass players, keyboardists, and engineers and whoever else would benefit from his expertise. Get real gear at real prices and go play a real show. If you just play at home or in the studio, this is probably the best signal conditioner I've ever heard. That other review somewhere on the Internet that talks about the magic boxes, I concur. Even if you're not using it as a preamp and you like the sound you dial up with your amp, it will really enhance the signal and work as a great dirt box. Directions: Step on it for mo' better. Leave on. Bow out after show.

Update after 1 year:

“Fast forward one year since I first received the Double Drive and everything is still as inspirational as the day I got it. I am more familiar with the nuances of the relatively straightforward design and enjoy manipulating them and dialing them into each room I play in. It has held up wonderfully as a preamp and drive pedal. All the speaker setups I've had and experience with this pedal have led me to become extremely excited to entrench myself more into the world of Siegmund. His service to players' individual needs and responsiveness are top notch - only matched by the quality and musicality of his products. I feel this has set me up for an understanding of his designs and I look forward to experiencing more through the Missing Link, Custom Preamps, Diddy Wah, Sound King, 6L6 amp, KT66 amp, and EL84 amp. I've really just scratched the surface, but every time I see a new amp demo I giggle to myself thinking they don't even realize there is a modern day Howard Dumble in the making that they're missing fiddling with their sub par amp that costs more than his (except I truly jive with Siegmund sound and only *merely like* Dumble as a useful tone that sounds like Christmas with a 335). So as for me, I have had a solid year and a half with Siegmund. I would have definitely purchased more if I had the funds available for that purchase - that is the ONLY thing holding me back. Nothing but great things to say and I will report back with more as I experience more of his gear. The best thing I can say about the DD is that I have nothing to add to my initial exhaustive review... It. Just. Works. It does what you want it to do, and it's familiar but improved. The micro tubes take a few weeks to get used to in the context of your rig but they're worth it. The only downside so far to Siegmund is that I don't have everything I need from him yet!”

Summary:

The Double Drive sounds purely excellent without sacrificing musicality. It has been a pleasure to own, it is both familiar and exciting new territory to explore – immediately usable and doesn't get old. It is straightforward enough to be genius level of simple while maintaining versatility. It is well built and comes from a great small business. Works equally well as preamp or drive pedal. The voltage regulator is all kinds of fun and effective. Highly usable EQ that actually changes sound and never sounds bad. Open clean sound, thick fuzzy wooly drive sound, boost, crunch, overdrive, whatever.... The thing just does it all in stride. This piece of gear has evolved my idea of what is possible. I could go on gushing about different details but it wouldn't matter... you'll either give it a try or you won't and I feel sorry for you if you choose to skip it. Great tool to have! If you find something that you don't like about it, I would actually like you to have Chris send me a message with what it is because I genuinely don't think there is anything not to like unless you only want distortion and high gain. After a year I feel like I'm just scratching the surface... I need more Siegmund.

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