



Audio Sprockets ToneDexter II

If you're ready to get nerdy about your acoustic tone, this intelligent pre-amp is the unit for you

BY DARYL ROBERTSON

IMAGINE THIS: YOU'VE just invested a couple of thousand pounds into your dream acoustic guitar. You strum your first chord, and it sounds like magic. The tone is bright, rich, and full of harmonic depth - exactly what you'd expect from a top-notch flat-top. But then you plug it in. Suddenly, that vibrant acoustic tone is transformed into a flat, overly compressed, scratchy version of itself, reminiscent of a cheap imitation. What gives?

The culprit is often the piezo pickup, commonly found under the saddle of many acoustic guitars. These pickups struggle to capture the true essence of your instrument's sound in a room. Sure, a well-placed microphone can bring your tone back to life, but let's face it - setting up mics can be a hassle and prone to feedback, especially in live settings. That's where the Audio Sprockets ToneDexter II comes in.

This innovative little stompbox is designed specifically to restore the full-bodied tone of your acoustic instrument. Using proprietary digital signal processing technology - known as WaveMaps - ToneDexter II aims to transform the uninspiring sound of your pickup into a stunning, microphone-quality replica. This means you can take that rich, acoustic sound to gigs or recording sessions without the fuss of mics, stands, and tangled cables.

But that's not all. The ToneDexter II comes loaded with a dedicated boost control for that extra punch, an intuitive tuner that's easy to read, anti-feedback controls for peace of mind on stage, and even built-in reverb for added depth. Plus, it's versatile enough to work with guitars, violins, mandolins, dobros, banjos, upright basses, and most other acoustic stringed instruments that have pickups.

A rather impressive list of specs for sure, but is it too good to be true? Well, today we open up the doors of the testing lab and put this stomp under the microscope to see if it really can transform our acoustic tone for the better, or if you need to be a Poindexter to use it.

Build quality

At a smidge under £600, this pedal isn't exactly budget-friendly, but let me tell you, the moment I pulled it out of the box, I understood where at least some of the investment goes. The ToneDexter II is seriously sturdy and impressively put together. Simply put, this thing is a tank.

Right off the bat, the rugged design makes it clear that the ToneDexter is crafted to withstand the trials and tribulations of life on the road. I wouldn't hesitate to toss this beauty in the back of my van for a night at the local open mic, that's for sure.

When I flipped the unit over, I was greeted by a generous array of inputs and outputs, each one easily accessible and clearly labelled, exactly where you'd expect them to be. The footswitches? Well, they are on point, too. They feel solid and smooth underfoot, and just like the rest of the unit, reassuringly well built.

Honestly, after spending time with this pedal, I can confidently say I have zero complaints about its construction. It's apparent that this is a serious piece of gear that combines both form and function.

Usability

Now, actually using the pedal is a pretty mixed bag in one way. While it's pretty simple to record a WaveMap, anything deeper requires a fair amount of menu hopping, and it's not always obvious where all the settings are hiding.

First, I need to mention that this unit doesn't come set up and ready to use straight out of the box. In fact, there are no presets saved in the unit when you receive it. So, to get started, you need to grab your favourite pickup-equipped acoustic, a microphone, and a nice quiet space to start your capture.

Generating the capture is pretty straightforward. Once everything is plugged in, tap the mute button, then the boost switch, and start playing - it's recommended to explore a broad selection of chords all over the neck to ensure you capture a complete picture of your instrument. I was pleasantly surprised by how easy this was to do, and within a couple of minutes, I had a genuinely convincing WaveMap of my gorgeous J-45. That said, I really did expect the unit to ship with some presets already installed for those players who don't know where to start when recording an



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acoustic guitar.

To get clarity on this, I reached out to Audio Sprockets' James May to understand the decision behind not including pre-made WaveMaps. “This is a philosophical decision that we made from the start, right at ToneDexter's inception,” says James. “We believe you'll never get the best results using a WaveMap created for one acoustic instrument on another acoustic instrument. The physics simply stack the odds against you because each individual guitar has a unique spectral footprint - a complex pattern of resonant peaks and dips that give your guitar its signature sound,” he explains.

“Even guitars of the same make and model, though they may sound similar, will have spectral footprints that differ enough such that a WaveMap created on one may sound veiled or slightly off when applied to another,” adds James. “And this assumes you're using the exact same pickup, but those vary significantly in their response, too. Yes, I know it can happen that sometimes you'll get usable results mixing and matching WaveMaps like this, but we don't want to have to answer to customer dissatisfaction, confusion, or frustration. I call it the Fishman Aura syndrome (with all due respect to Larry Fishman). We've made the training process ultra-simple so that users can take a bit of time to get the best results possible,” he clarifies. “It's about finding that sweet spot where your specific guitar's character shines through the mix, and honestly, it's a rewarding experience when you nail it.”

So, while the lack of presets might initially feel like a hurdle, once you dive into creating your own WaveMaps, you might just find it liberating. You're not just using a one-size-fits-all solution with the ToneDexter II; you're crafting a unique sound tailored to your instrument. Sure, it might take a little more effort upfront, but the personal touch you get in return makes it well worth it in the end. Just remember, every moment spent fine-tuning is a step closer to capturing the true essence of your favourite guitar.

Now, when it comes to deep editing and turning on and off the effects, it isn't the most intuitive pedal to use - this isn't a unit you can operate without the manual handy. Granted, once I spent a few days with the pedal, I started to get used to where each setting was hidden, but it did take a little getting used to - this pedal certainly makes you work for your tone.

Sound

To fully explore the tonal capabilities of the ToneDexter II, I began my testing with my trusted Gibson J-45 workhorse, a standard SE condenser microphone, and a carefully controlled space in my home studio. I positioned the mic about a foot away from the guitar, angled toward the 12th fret. I experimented with my playing position before finalising the WaveMap capture, listening carefully through a set of headphones to ensure I was capturing the exact sound I was looking for.

I have to say, once I created a WaveMap, the results were pretty remarkable. As much as I cherish my J-45, the tone produced by its pickup often falls short of capturing the guitar's true essence. While the sound generated by the LR Baggs VTC isn't bad, it lacks the richness and harmonic complexity of the guitar's acoustic voice. Fortunately, with the ToneDexter at my feet, that concern swiftly vanished.

Engaging the pedal transformed my previously thin and uninspiring tone into a beautifully fat, warm, and full-bodied sound that faithfully represented how my guitar sounded with this go-to mic setup. Of course, I experimented further by swapping out the condenser mic for a Shure SM57 and moving the mic placement closer to the bridge. This change produced a new WaveMap that was brighter, less bass-heavy, and more focused, yet just as accurate in its representation.



GUITAR VERDICT



Sick of fighting against the weak tone of your acoustic's piezo pickup? Well, the ToneDexter II is here to save the day. The lack of pre-loaded presets might put off some players at first, but those willing to put in the work will be rewarded with the acoustic tone of their dreams.

PROS

- + In the right hands, it can truly transfer your unplugged tone for the stage.
- + Tailored around your specific guitar sound.
- + Very well made.

CONS

- No pre-loaded presets.
- Quality of WaveMaps is dependent on being able to mic your acoustic well.

SPECS

TYPE: Acoustic pre-amp pedal
CONTROLS: Out, In, Phones/Aux Out, Stereo/Aux In, Low, Mid, High, Mute/Tuner, Boost
FEATURES: Advanced DSP algorithm creates a faithful reproduction of your mic'd sound, 32 WaveMap slots, 3 EQ blocks, reverb, Smart feedback control, tuner, MIDI program control, external footswitch control, and boost
CONNECTIVITY: Input, Output, Mic in, Control in, Send, Return, DI out
BYPASS: True-bypass
POWER: 9-15V
DIMENSIONS: 165mm x 150mm x 66mm
WEIGHT: 2 lbs

It's important to highlight that while the ToneDexter II offers incredible capabilities, the quality of its output will ultimately hinge on your overall gear, your space, and the miking technique you employ. A high-quality guitar, microphone, and proper placement are fundamental to achieving the best sound. As advanced as this pedal is, if your gear isn't up to par or if the mic isn't positioned correctly, you'll never get that polished studio tone you are looking for.

That said, the ToneDexter II is equipped with a powerful EQ that features a handy visual representation of the EQ curve you're creating through your strategic cuts and boosts. I found that this feature grants extensive tonal flexibility, allowing me to fine-tune the sound to match my desired acoustic aesthetic. Whether I was looking to enhance the warmth, clarity, or presence, the pedal enables me to effortlessly sculpt my tone with a twist of a few dials.

Verdict

In a world of instant gratification, the ToneDexter II stands its ground as a pedal that requires you to put in some effort before you are granted access to acoustic tonal bliss. There's no denying that this is an incredibly powerful tool for the gigging acoustic guitarist, and in fact, I could even see myself using it in the studio, too.

However, it's difficult not to compare this unit to the Fishman Aura Spectrum DI or the LR Baggs Voiceprint. Okay, they aren't exactly the same, and yes, the ToneDexter takes acoustic modelling to a whole new level, but I know the lack of presets will turn some people off this product. But more than that, if you aren't particularly well-versed in miking up an acoustic guitar, you may find it difficult to get truly professional results.

So, if that's you, then you may want to look elsewhere, but if you are willing to invest the time to understand its intricacies and put in the necessary effort, the ToneDexter II can reward you with an unmatched level of tonal customisation. Its ability to replicate acoustic tones with detail and authenticity is impressive, breathing new life into your acoustic performances.

The build quality of the ToneDexter II is most definitely substantial, sturdy and more than reliable enough for the road. Its user interface, while not as straightforward as some competitors, offers a level of depth that experienced players will certainly appreciate.

Ultimately, whether you're gigging or recording, the ToneDexter II is a formidable ally for those willing to invest time and effort into mastering its features. It may not have the user-friendly appeal of plug-and-play pedals with preset options, for the dedicated guitarist seeking exceptional acoustic fidelity, the journey with the ToneDexter II is sure to be incredibly rewarding. If you thrive on crafting your sound and possess the patience to navigate its complexities, this pedal might just become an essential part of your musical toolkit.