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Effects Pedals ...For All Occasions!

By Phil Feser, Bob Tekippe
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Effects pedals, stompboxes... call them what you will. But pretty much since the dawn of the electric guitar's time, they've been there,

adding to the guitarist's palette of tonal spice, and always ranging from mild to wild. We recently got our hands on a crop of some of the latest.

Our first foray was a revisiting of efforts of one Michael Fuller, of Fulltone. Known for its upscale construction and top-notch quality, Fulltone effects offer a meat-and-potatoes approach (no unnecessary blinking lights or fancy switching), with fantastic tonal versatility that puts them on the shelf above mass-production units. Two of his more recent creations are the Fat-Boost and Choralfange.

Fulltone Fat-Boost

Enclosed in a small gray metal box about the size of an MXR distortion or phase pedal, the Fat-Boost is a preamp designed to work with any amplifier, and with any type of guitar pickup, including bass or acoustic instruments. A fundamental design, the unit's name is a good descriptor of its mission.

The pedal has three controls and a standard on/off stomp switch. It's powered by a single 9-volt battery or AC adapter. There are volume and tone controls which are fairly self-explanatory, and a tiny Input Gain knob positioned between the volume and tone controls. The Input Gain is used to boost the input signal level to achieve the desired effect? whether it be sparkling clean or slightly hotter. Fuller says the unit has a Class A FET-driven circuit that delivers over 20 dB of clean boost without changing the EQ.

Compared to a distortion or overdrive box, the effect is subtle and fairly transparent in terms of the way it affects the original signal. The Fat-Boost can be used to create a clean boost that will increase the volume and amount of sustain, as well as to add more harmonic

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overtone to the mix, but it does not drastically alter the tone or add extra noise. Often, a player may need to boost their volume level for a particular phrase or lead break, but will want to maintain the same characteristic tone. In that case, you can easily match the instrument's original tone, then adjust the Fat-Boost for desired boost and sustain. In addition, you can increase the Tone to add more girth and fullness to the lower mids, or increase the input gain level to add a bit more dirt.

We first tested the Fat-Boost through our beloved 100-watt Marshall plexi stack. For guitars, we used our stock '65 Strat and a '78 Les Paul Custom with Duncan JB and '59 humbuckers. We then put the pedal in line with a Boss SD-1 Super Overdrive, the Fulltone Choralflange, and a Boss DD-3 Digital Delay, placing it first in the signal chain. Even when used with other effects, the Fat-Boost did not change the amp's characteristic tone when used only as a boost. If anything, it emphasized the beefy qualities and fullness, while adding more sustain. Additionally, switching is very quiet. For more sizzle, we cranked up the levels of the Input Gain and Tone, then set the pedal's volume to create a fitting tone to match particular riffs and desired effects. We employed the Fat-Boost for hours of jamming on Zeppelin, AC/DC, and SRV riffs, as well as others.

The Fat-Boost will complement virtually any setup. A bit of experimentation is required to find the settings that work best with a particular rig. Players looking for a simple boost will definitely want to check this one out.

Fulltone CF-1 Choralflange

Housed in a metal case constructed of brushed aluminum and green enamel-coated hammered aluminum, the Choralflange offers rich chorus and flange effects with total control over the parameters. The unit can be used in mono and stereo setups by plugging the appropriate cables into the single input and two output jacks. As the instructions note, this unit is not recommended for use with super high-gain pickups, as they could overload the input level.

Unlike the Fat-Boost, the on/off switch inside the Choralflange can be set for true bypass (for mono operation only) or buffered out (for mono or stereo, and recommended when using very long cables). These settings can be adjusted by using the tiny DIP switch inside the box (easily accessible by removing the backplate). A diagram inside indicates the settings for each mode. It's also important that these settings should not be altered while the unit is plugged in, to avoid potential damage to the electronics. Also noteworthy is the stomp switch, which is surrounded by a

thick rubber ring that cushions the impact.

The Choralflange has an array of switches and knobs that provide many ways to regulate the sounds. There are far more controls than on a typical chorus or flanger, so reading the manual is highly recommended. Two small switches select between chorus and flange modes, as well as narrow (one octave) or wide (two octaves) range of effect. Rotary knobs adjust the Mix (wet/dry signal), Delay Time (frequency of the effect), Depth (saturation of the effect) and Rate (speed of modulation, indicated by flashing LED). A mini volume adjust knob helps balance the signal's volume level when the effect is engaged.

To test the Choralflange, we used mono and stereo setups. We played through the same setup, then added a second 100-watt Marshall head, and split the cabinets to create a pair of close-matching half-stacks for a stereo rig.

The instruction manual provides a selection of sample settings to give the user a good starting point to develop their own sounds. The effects themselves are smooth and silky, as you'd expect from analog circuitry, but do not produce the tinny, unwanted sound in the higher ranges of modulation, which similar effects tend to throw in. The Choralflange also avoided adding unwanted noise to the signal chain, and switching on and off or between modes was silent. From subtle, barely-there tones to deeper and more intense effects, the Choralflange demonstrates them excellently in both mono and stereo modes. Aside from the standard chorus effects, the controls can also be set to create excellent Leslie-type effects that are more realistic than the average stompbox.

In terms of features and tone, the Choralflange wins high ratings. Compared to faithful and familiar pedals like the Boss Chorus and MXR Flanger, the Choralflange is superior in sound and variety of controls.

Carl Martin Pedals

We also grabbed three Danish-made Carl Martin pedals for a test drive, just to see what was going on across the Atlantic.

Carl Martin shares many of the qualities of the Fulltone pedals in terms of quality of construction (aluminum cases) and high-quality stomp switches, but also sport some differences, like built-in regulated power supplies (no batteries or wallwarts), and chassis-mounted pots and jacks.

Hot Drive?n Boost/Hot Drive?n Boost Mk II

These overdrive pedals are set up very similarly, with gain, wave (tone), level, and boost level controls, along with drive and boost bypass switches and LEDs. The company says

the original HDB is ?...designed to imitate the sound of a good, old-fashioned distorting amp...? The Mk II, on the other hand, is designed to ?...imitate the sound of a hot, overdriven tube amp.?

To help see what they could do, we grabbed a new Gibson Les Paul and a Fender Strat and plugged them into the house Peavey Delta Blues combo.

Very quickly, we discovered that by manipulating the Wave control, we were able to get a smooth, tight, tube overdrive with both guitars.

The Mk II?s overall lower tone was more suited for the Strat?s single-coil pickups. The boost level and footswitch worked great to boost solos and fatten up the tone for better note separation.

Regardless of the guitar, both pedals reacted like tube preamps when we used the instruments? volume and tone controls to clean up the sound or soften the tone.

Contour & Boost

The Contour & Boost is a hybrid EQ pedal with two filters, a high pass, and a low pass crossed over at 440 hz. The company says it is specifically designed to change the sound of your instrument. Given its excellent filter characteristics, it makes a good tool for fixing many types of EQ problems.

Each filter has a sweepable frequency control (65 hz. to 440 hz/440 hz to 8 khz), and a gain control with 12 dB of gain. Unlike most graphic EQ pedals that have inherent phasing problems when boosting or cutting severely (and a generally sterile sound), the Contour & Boost?s filters are smooth and very musical.

This pedal has a long list of possible uses, from adding EQ to an amp with limited tone controls, as an acoustic guitar preamp, as a solo boost to add gain and note definition, to possibly even an active crossover/EQ in a bass rig.

Electro-Harmonix Big Muff reissue

This Big Muff is a reissue of the late-?70s/early-?80s pedal with we happen to have an original to compare it to. The first thing we noticed was the cool, handy plywood box it arrived in (which the originals didn?t).

Overall, the reissue is very true to the original ? the heavy-duty steel case is the same, as are the controls and jacks, silkscreening, and vintage-style stomp switch. Some of the differences (most of them welcome additions) are a 9-volt battery door on the bottom, an LED indicator, and the emotion of the tone bypass switch.

Both pedals deliver a wide range of sounds from a gritty, compressed overdrive to a out-of-control ?70s fuzz. The original had a

slightly warmer, more natural sound, but for the most part they were identical.

Frantone ?The Sweet? Fuzz

Frantone Electronics is a New York City company that has been hand-making a variety of effects pedals since 1994, and recently launched its germanium-transistor powered The Sweet, which the company says offers "...full bottom and crisp highs... and endless sustain...?"

Though simple in design, the Frantone units are very sturdy and include some nice touches like an enamel finish, bakelite knobs (a lil' vintage element), and a bevel on the LED indicator that really helps when stage lights make it hard to determine whether certain things in your signal chain are engaged.

The Sweet features volume, sustain, and tone controls with an LED indicator in an aluminum MXR-style case. We plugged it into a Les Paul, hit the footswitch, and were able to create a retro fuzz tone with a sweeter, warmer tone than most of other fuzz pedals we've tested. The high-quality filters in the tone and sustain controls gave it a very rounded, musical sound.

Fulltone Fat-Boost

Type Of Effect: Signal booster and tone control.

Features: Controls for Volume, Tone and Input Gain; true bypass on/off stomp switch; LED indicator; operates on 9-volt battery or AC adapter; five-year warranty.

Price: \$179.

Contact: Fulltone Musical Products Inc, 12906 1/2 Venice Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90066, (310) 397-3456, fax (310) 397-6917, fulltone.com.

Fulltone CF-1 Choralflange

Type Of Effect: Analog chorus and flanger unit.

Features: Switches for Chorus/Flange and Narrow/Wide bandwidth; Controls for Mix, Delay Time, Depth, Rate and Volume Adj.; mono or stereo operation; selectable true bypass or buffered out operation; LED indicator shows modulation speed; operates on 9-volt battery or AC adapter; five year warranty.

Price: \$349.

Contact: Fulltone Musical Products Inc, 12906 1/2 Venice Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90066, (310) 397-3456, fax (310) 397-6917, fulltone.com.

Carl Martin Hot Drive?n Boost (and Mk II)

Type Of Effect: Signal booster and tone control.

Features: Built-in power supply, tube-like overdrive, separate "boost" circuit.

Price: \$189.

Contact: East Sound Research,
Raadmandsvej 24, DK-8500, Denmark, ph.
45-86-32-51-00, carlmartin.com.

Carl Martin Contour & Boost

Type Of Effect: EQ/signal contour pedal.

Features: Dual-filter, sweepable frequency control (65hz to 440hz/440hz to 8khz), and gain control with 12 dB of gain.

Price: \$189.

Contact: East Sound Research,
Raadmandsvej 24, DK-8500, Denmark, ph.
45-86-32-51-00, carlmartin.com.

Electro-Harmonix Big Muff Pi

Type Of Effect: Distortion/sustainer.

Features: Heavy-duty steel case, vintage-style stomp switch, controls for volume, sustain, and tone, 9-volt battery doo, LED indicator.

Price: \$116.

Contact: Electro-Harmonix, phone (212)
529-0466, e-mail sales@ ehx.com.

Frantone The Sweet

Type Of Effect: Fuzztone.

Features: Cast aluminum housing, epoxy enamel finish, true bypass switching, signal bypass and status LED w/steel bezel, Switchcraft jacks, bakelite knobs, hard-mounted PCB, external power jack, teflon hookup wire.

Price: \$179.

Contact: Frantone Electronics,
www.frantone.com

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