

BLACK STARS & REVELATIONS

GBINFO

BLACKSTAR PEDALS

BUILT IN: Korea
POWER: 16V AC mains adaptor only (supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 80(h) x 160(w) x 119(d) mm
WEIGHT: 1.2kg (2.65lbs)

HT-BOOST

PRICE: £89
TYPE: Boost stompbox
FEATURES: Boost, bass & treble controls, ECC83 valve, high- and low-gain outputs

HT-DRIVE

PRICE: £89
TYPE: Overdrive stompbox
FEATURES: Gain, tone & level controls, ECC83 valve, speaker-emulated output

HT-DIST

PRICE: £99
TYPE: Distortion stompbox
FEATURES: Gain, bass, middle, treble, level & ISF controls, ECC83 valve, speaker-emulated output

HT-DISTX

PRICE: £99
TYPE: High-gain distortion stompbox
FEATURES: Gain, bass, middle, treble, level & ISF controls, ECC83 valve, speaker-emulated output

HT-DUAL

PRICE: £139
TYPE: Overdrive stompbox
FEATURES: 2 channels, clean/crunch switch, gain 1, gain 2, bass, middle, treble, level 1, level 2 & ISF controls, ECC83 valve, speaker-emulated output

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PAUL SALTER BLASTS OFF WITH A BATCH OF STOMPERS FROM A NEW BRITISH BRAND

Even more than fantastic phasers, whacked-out wahs and dreamy delays, the sight of a shiny new overdrive or distortion pedal is guaranteed to warm the cockles of any guitarist's heart. Maybe it's the versatility, or maybe it's the fact that they're so immediately accessible, but with just a modest financial outlay there's the possibility that you could turn your polite setup into a roaring factory for monster riffs and screaming solos.

How exciting then, to hear that a team of ex-Marshall Amplification chaps have set up a new venture, producing not only a drool-worthy range of amps, but also a batch of valve-powered overdrive pedals with all sorts of tone-friendly features. The company is making some bold claims about the quality of its wares – and with the years of accumulated expertise at its disposal, this may be justified – but can these Northampton-based boys deliver the goods with their Korean-built stompboxes? Bring it on, Blackstar.

CONSTRUCTION

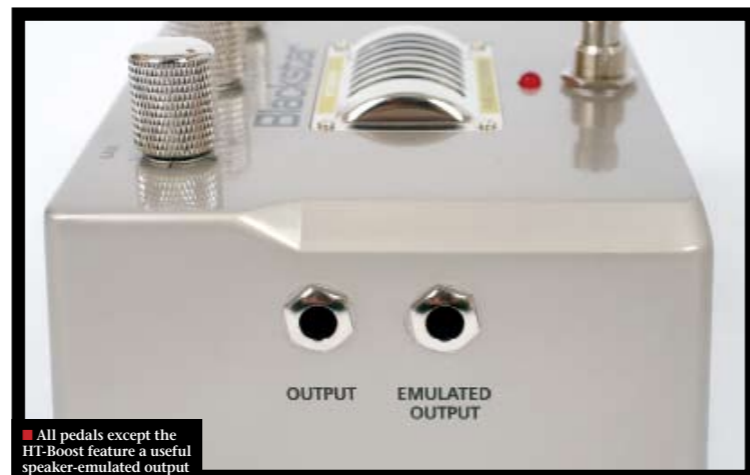
It seems like a slightly primitive rule of thumb to apply to high-end equipment, but where stompers are concerned, a bit of weight can be a very reassuring sign. These pedals are a case in point – each one has a solid, brick-like presence that will add a good couple of pounds to your pedalboard. All these pedals use the same thick aluminium chassis and have a durable sheet of rubber on the base, which ensures that these sturdy little units will remain exactly where you put them. They're finished with

SWITCH RIGHT

BUFFER THE NOISE SLAYER

■ Hard-wired, true-bypass switching can often give off some nasty clunks when used in high-gain circuits, so Blackstar has given the HT range an active bypass.

The chaps have evidently done their homework, as the result is silent, pop-free switching. Of course, a buffered output also means that you can easily run long cables and add a few more effects to your chain without the signal from your guitar degrading unduly.



■ All pedals except the HT-Boost feature a useful speaker-emulated output



■ Amp-like controls make the HT range easy to get to grips with

a shiny paint job that recalls the 'champagne' finish that was popular with hi-fi manufacturers in the '70s, and are decorated with subtle yet effective black lettering. Apart from these pedals' sheer chunkiness, the main item of visual interest is the chromed grille that sits slap in the middle of each unit. A peek through the bars reveals these pedals' beating heart – an ECC83 (a.k.a. 12AX7) valve.

The use of valves in stompboxes is nothing new. Manufacturers have been doing it for years in an attempt to add some oh-so-desirable valve-amp overdrive qualities. But where the Blackstar approach differs from most is that these pedals supply the valves with a full 300 volts. This is the kind

of voltage that you'd get in an amplifier, which means that the valve in the pedal should react to your playing dynamics like a valve in a real valve amp, rather than the comparatively neutered sound of a traditional overdrive pedal. Blackstar seems to be quite pleased with this feature, though it does mean that there's no way that these pedals can run on battery power. Each pedal comes supplied with its own 16V AC mains adaptor, which offers enough juice to be stepped-up and rectified to the required levels.

FEATURES

Each pedal in the range has its own set of functions and features, but at heart

these are five variations on the overdrive stompbox theme with a familiar set of controls. The HT-Boost and HT-Drive are the simplest of all, with just three controls each – boost, bass and treble for the HT-Boost and gain, tone and level for the HT-Drive.

Things get more tweakable with the HT-Dist and HT-Distx, which have an amp-like setup that includes knobs for gain, bass, middle, treble and level. They're also equipped with Blackstar's ISF (infinite shape feature) control, which brings an impressive amount of variation to the basic tones. The Blackstar chaps are keen to stress that ISF isn't the typical 'contour' or semi-parametric EQ control offered by some amps, but instead works by shifting the tonal centres of the EQ controls, thereby changing the whole character of the sound at a stroke.

It's a very clever and user-friendly way of giving these pedals more tonal versatility, and is also included on the most flexible of all the HT stompboxes – the HT-Dual. As well as the full range of tone controls featured on the HT-Dist and its higher-gain counterpart, the HT-Distx, the HT-Dual has an extra channel to give it maximum flexibility. The EQ controls work across both channels, but there are two dual-concentric knobs which offer separate gain and level controls for each, and a push switch to set channel 1 to 'clean' or 'crunch'.

As if that weren't enough, all of the pedals except for the HT-Boost are equipped with a second output that offers speaker simulation. This has been carefully designed to model each stage of a real power amp section and the response of a speaker and cabinet – we'll have none of your simple top-end-smoothing EQ curves here, thank you very much.

SOUNDS – HT-BOOST

Boost pedals are among the most overlooked and undervalued effects, but there's far more on offer here than just a simple lift in volume for when you want your solo to stand out. For a start, the tone controls are some of the most natural-sounding that you're likely to hear from a stompbox. There are no peaky or extreme settings at all, but at the same time this unit is capable of impressive tonal variation.

Even small adjustments are noticeable, and they're perfect for adding or reducing certain characteristics in a particular guitar. An over-bright Tele can easily be tamed, for example, or a slightly muddy Les Paul Standard can be cleaned up and trimmed down. Add this smooth tone-shaping ability to the considerable gain that's on offer and you have an extremely effective boost pedal, with only a tiny increase in unwanted noise. There's a choice of low- and high-gain outputs, but in most cases you probably won't need to bother with the high-gain output, as even the low-gain output has a good amount of welly on tap.

SOUNDS – HT-DRIVE

This is where the natural break-up of a valve being pushed into overdrive should really pay dividends, and it does – crank up that gain control and you're in line for a massive helping of dirty fun. The full-on (and, it has to be said, very Marshall-like) possibilities of the higher gain settings are a real treat, and had us grinning from ear to ear.

It's just as enjoyable at the other end of the filth scale – turn the gain right down to around eight o'clock, and you could easily forget that you weren't dealing with a maxed-out, vintage-style valve amp. It responds

SO WHY VALVES?

THE TECHNICAL BIT

■ It's a simplified answer to a complicated question, but it all comes down to clipping.

Push a transistor into overdrive and the result is harsh-sounding square-wave distortion – you're literally chopping off the top and bottom of your signal. It's inflexible, harsh-sounding and not very musical at all. A valve, on the other hand, clips more gradually, and, viewed on an oscilloscope, the waveform looks rounder at the edges with a more complex shape. The range of the distortion is

much greater, and the harmonics that are emphasised by the clipping are even-sounding and less discordant. The valves used in these pedals are ECC83s (just as commonly known by their American name, 12AX7). They're dual-triode devices, part of which means that, in effect, they're two valves in one. This attribute is used in the Blackstar pedals so that your guitar signal can be overdriven in two stages – known as cascaded gain – which results in a fuller and smoother-sounding overdrive.



brilliantly to your playing dynamics, and crunches-up in just as pleasing a manner when you whack out some big chords. Even better than that, by lowering your guitar's volume, you can clean up the sound almost completely to leave a beautifully ringing tone that beats the bypassed sound for depth and richness hands down. Wonderful stuff.

SOUNDS – HT-DIST

Just to wallow in the mood set by the HT-Drive a little longer, our first taste of the HT-Dist was with a very low gain setting. It's a credit to the guys at Blackstar that we were in no way disappointed with the results achieved with this pedal barely ticking over. There's loads of dynamic range left before the crunch sets in, and plenty of scope for clean tones at the lower regions of your guitar's volume control.

These lower gain levels don't have quite the same springiness and expressive potential as most of the settings dialled into the HT-Drive, but this isn't what the HT-Dist is all about – which you soon discover as you

"A PEEK THROUGH THE BARS REVEALS THE BEATING HEART OF THESE PEDALS – AN ECC83 VALVE"

crank that gain control a little. Even before you get a quarter of the way around the dial, the HT-Dist springs into life with a smooth, fluid, classic distortion that's full of colour and energy. This time around the effect is more reminiscent of a master volume valve-amp overdrive, with the emphasis on a cranked-up preamp. However, this is more like preamp drive at a volume where the power amp is just starting to add its magic, thickening and expanding the tone without losing the definition that's needed for heavy rock and metal.

SOUNDS – HT-DISTX

It's hard to imagine a scenario in which the HT-Dist doesn't provide enough distortion, but if you need more, the HT-Distx is the place to get it. It's also hard to believe that such a high-gain distortion pedal could sound so sophisticated. The gain here sounds tighter and more intense, yet the effect never swamps your basic tone. Even though the HT-Distx can easily push on into that Vai-like infinite-sustain type of compressed distortion, the pedal will still respond to variations in your picking dynamics. The HT-Distx also has a slightly different kind of character to the HT-Dist – it seems that Blackstar is going for a modern metal vibe here, as the mid-range has less kick while the bottom-end can be simply huge.

It's not just metal on the cards here though – the amp-like EQ and the



DETAILS

FRESH, EXCITING PEDALS FROM A BIG NEW NAME IN AMPS AND EFFECTS



■ The HT-Dual has two channels, each with independent gain and level controls



■ They don't take batteries, but a 16V AC mains adaptor is supplied with each pedal



■ An ECC83 valve provides the oomph that makes these effects a little bit special



GBCONCLUSION

BRILLIANT BRITISH STOMPERS

■ Blackstar's bold marketing claim is that these pedals produce "the sound in your head". Obviously everyone has different ideas of what makes a good tone, but these stompboxes come pretty close to the sounds that echo around our imagination when we're thinking up new sounds and ideas.

They've achieved this remarkable feat through flexible gain and EQ controls, good circuit design and by using these ECC83 valves in the right way – the same way that they'd operate in a valve amp's preamp. OK, most of what we know as 'valve tone' is down to the power amp, but these valves are definitely doing something – something good! The result, as we've mentioned throughout this review, is a wonderfully natural-sounding set of overdrives. The speaker-emulated outputs are well beyond adequate when combined in a recorded mix, if not quite as sophisticated as the outputs from some dedicated modelling devices, but these pedals really belong in front of an amp. They're among the most impressive we've seen, especially at these prices. **GB**

GBOPINION

BLACKSTAR HT PEDALS

GOLD STARS

- ★ Fantastic tone
- ★ Smooth and dynamic drive and distortion
- ★ Real amp feel

BLACK MARKS

- Absolutely none

IDEAL FOR...

Us – we want them all!

ISF control have a huge amount of influence on the tone. You can summon up the peaky, mid-rich sounds of those late-'80s shredders, or classic metal with an Iron Maiden-like feel. This is where the ISF really comes into its own – it almost gives you the ability to choose which side of the Atlantic you want your tone to come from, as well as add adding different kinds of mid-range emphasis, which is great for recording extra-thick, double-tracked guitar parts.

SOUNDS – HT-DUAL

The top-of-the-line HT Dual seems to incorporate all the good bits of the other pedals in the HT range and roll them into a single loveable package. Not only does this stompbox pull off the very rare trick of actually sounding like real amp overdrive, it offers such flexibility that you can dial in a fair approximation of almost any modern style of rock amp, as well as a few classic ones too.

The clean setting is remarkably good, bringing a warmth and depth to even the most sterile amplifier, but the real treat comes when you press the

mini-switch to bring in the crunch tones. This is real guitar-hero stuff, enabling you to bring out Kossoff-like depth from a Les Paul, Blackmore punch and fatness from a Strat and even a decent Angus Young tone from just about anything with humbuckers.

This is just the start however – there's a whole other channel to get your teeth into, which works perfectly with the same settings as the crunch channel. It's similar stuff to the HT-Dist, but a little lighter and warmer around the edges. The metal tones are easily in the same league as Blackstar's dedicated distortion pedals, and the expansive crunch and silky lead tones are so good that you might end up re-thinking your whole rig to base it entirely around this pedal. Santa, if you're reading this, we want one!

GBRATINGS

BLACKSTAR HT PEDALS

BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★★