



## Blackstar HT pedals

£89-£139

**Blackstar HT-Dual DS-2, HT-Dist DS-1, HT-DistX DX-1, HT-Drive OD-1 and HT-Boost BT-1**

**A new range of Korean-made valve overdrive and boost pedals that have their roots in darkest Northamptonshire** by *Simon Bradley*

PHOTOGRAPHY AMANDA THOMAS

**B**lackstar is a new British company boasting an R&D, engineering and marketing team that cut its teeth with perhaps the biggest amp name of all time: Marshall. Breaking out on their own in this new venture, the Blackstar guys have a range of amps in the pipeline – reviews coming soon – but first up are these valve-driven pedals, all devoted to that most satisfying of pursuits: distortion and drive.

The pedals share various features. Each is loaded with a single Russian-made ECC83 dual-triode preamp valve, backlit to glow red. More interestingly, that valve runs off a full 300-volt circuit, (hence HT in the name: HT for 'high-tension' meaning high voltage). This is thought by many to offer better tone, gain and overload characteristics than low-voltage valve pedals.

After that, all except the HT-Boost offer a speaker-emulated out alongside the regular output for a direct-to-desk recording option, and finally, three of the quintet are loaded with what's called an ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control. Unlike more familiar contour circuits, this enables you to move the entire EQ section voicing between what you'd expect of two classic

amplifier tone circuits: Fender at one end and Marshall at the other.

"The ISF came about because we were looking for a way to voice test-bed amplifiers for artists," explains Blackstar's technical director, Bruce Keir. "We needed a way to continuously vary the tone beyond what was available from existing amplifiers. This would enable the player to create their signature sound before we 'locked it off' in their preferred setting. The method we came up with gave the ability to not only get the standard reference tones, but also the 'in-between' never-before-attainable voicings as well. It worked so effectively and so simply that we decided to make it a feature available for all guitarists to use."

Indeed, the ISF control broadly apes the tonal response of classic 6L6- or EL34-powered amps, plus many points in between. Intrigued? Us too...

### HT-Dual DS-2

As its name suggests, this unit offers a pair of distortion pedals in a single chassis that are available via two channels, each with its own footswitch. The three tone controls plus the ISF

pot are all master controls, while channel one has both clean and crunch modes, against channel two's single mode. Independent gain and volume regulators mean you can balance the two channels precisely to your needs.

**SOUNDS:** Channel two offers a smooth, fluid drive that spans a meaty rock rhythm tone to a full-on searing lead. The overall frequency response is wide, so this is no nasal, mid-heavy screamer. The drives clean up well as you roll your guitar's volume back too.

Channel one has a much wider range of gain thanks to its dual modes; a near-clean boost, through to a fuller, smooth drive. The ISF pot is also a winner – relatively more punchy and cutting at one end, or thicker and more loose at the other... and everything between.

The only downside is that it isn't obvious how to bypass the pedal; you press the activated switch a second time. Still, as a way of turning your single-channel amp into a three-sound fire-breather, this is pretty special.

### HT-Dist DS-1

This is the slightly more restrained of the two distortion pedals on review and



offers a more traditional front panel layout than that offered by the HT-Dual. Like all the pedals on test, the bomb-proof casing, high quality pots screwed to the chassis, heavy duty switches and high quality jacks all inspire confidence. This is true on the inside too: decent quality components and custom PCB designs, all held in place securely, suggesting a long and happy life.

**SOUNDS:** Like the HT-Dual, this is one hot pedal. It takes a few moments to balance the EQ and ISF pots with your own set-up and as such these aren't instant plug-and-go stompers – experimentation yields best results.

It's best described as 'in-your-face' and with gain set to just over halfway and erring towards the British side of the ISF, you're offered a full, aggressive and singing hard rock rhythm tone. Turning the ISF the other way reigns in the bottom end meaning more mid punch (not what we'd normally associate with 'American' voicing, but hey) for a more cutting tone. Ideal settings depend very much on your own guitar and amp, but all up the HT-Dist is capable of a wide range of rock styles short of out-and-out metal.

### HT-DistX DX-1

The legend 'pure valve filth' leaves you in no doubt as to which styles are best suited to this pedal. Although bearing exactly the same layout as the HT-Dist, this unit is designed to be hotter than the slopes of hell on a July afternoon...

**SOUNDS:** Even with the gain set to just past one there's plenty of the stuff on offer. Wind the wick further and the tone squashes and cascades, yet maintains dynamics and a notably big, amp-type feel for a pedal.

The most metal-esque scooped tones are with the ISF all the way clockwise, due to the more apparent bottom end. Reduce the middle, add as much bass as you can without 'woofing' and set the gain to just over half: that's where

HT-DUAL DS-2	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> The breadth of tones; general usability</li> <li>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Not immediately clear how to bypass the pedal</li> </ul>	

HT-DIST DS-1	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> A great sounding unit; plenty of drive</li> <li>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Can be a little harsh if you're not careful</li> </ul>	

## This is an excellent range of pedals that boasts high build quality across a spectrum of boost, overdrive and distortion gain levels

that lovely Hetfield crunch is to be found. The more the ISF turns anticlockwise, the more focused and cutting the tone becomes. In fact for all modern styles, including tuning our guitar all the way down to C, the HT-DistX remains clear, musical and earth-shatteringly heavy.

### HT-Drive OD-1

The HT-Drive forgoes the ISF and three-band EQ in favour of a simple tone pot. Blackstar calls the tone the 'A Class control', designed to retain the character of your chosen guitar, while still cutting unwanted fizz.

**SOUNDS:** There's less gain here than in the previous pedals, but even with it set to zero, we're just the dirty side of clean for Keef-style rock'n'roll chords. Heading up to around 9 o'clock – still low – ushers in vintage-style drive, then onwards towards Clapton-style singing lead lines. Things can get harsh with single-coils, and rolling back the tone pot helps if you like it all smoother and rounder. Naturally, for a touch of zing for your Les Paul's neck pickup, turn it back up.

Adding a spot of dirt to the amp enables you to use the HT-Drive to smooth out your tone and add sustain. While you can use the pedal as a straight solo booster – there's tons of level here – lots of players will also enjoy the extra sustain and harmonics

on top of an already cooking tone, yet without sacrificing too much of your core voice. Even better, it all cleans up nicely when you roll back your guitar's volume pot.

Despite its 'overdrive' name, there's still tons of gain in this pedal. If you want to distinguish it from the HT-Dist, the latter is somewhat smoother in a rock sense and also more versatile, though rootsier-minded players may well prefer the edgier, plug-and-play appeal of the HT-Drive.

### HT-Boost BT-1

If you have a classic amp that you love the sound of, chances are you don't want a modern-sounding pedal with tons of overdrive and distortion, but you still want a little – or big – push. So here the boost control works with the bass and treble controls to cut or boost your signal in those frequency bands: a simple way of tuning the pedal to your amp's voice.

Another interesting feature is that instead of the emulated out, you get two outputs, one for use with solid-state or hybrid amps and one for use with all-valve rigs. The 'high' output is hotter, presumably because you don't want to overload the front end of your tranny amp too much: urgh.

**SOUNDS:** Boost pedals traditionally work best with clean-ish, just-on-the-edge valve amps; it's a toneful, dynamic →

**BLACKSTAR HT-DUAL DS-2**  
**PRICE:** £139  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Two channel, valve-based overdrive pedal  
**PROGRAMMABLE:** No  
**CONTROLS:** Bass, middle, treble and ISF, dual concentric gain 1 and gain 2, dual concentric level 1 and level 2, gain/clean button  
**CONNECTIONS:** Input, output and emulated output  
**POWER:** Included 16-volt PSU only  
**OTHER FEATURES:** Channel and channel two footswitches, single ECC83 preamp tube  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Blackstar amps range from the Series One 45, Series One 100 and Series One 200 to the Artisan 15, 30 and 100 (£TBA)  
**Blackstar Amplification**  
**01536 312620**  
**www.blackstaramps.com**

**BLACKSTAR HT-DIST DS-1**  
 As HT-Dual except...  
**PRICE:** £99  
**TYPE:** Valve-based distortion pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Gain, bass, middle, treble, ISF and level  
**CONNECTIONS:** Input, output and emulated output

**BLACKSTAR HT-DIST DX-1**  
As HT-Dist DS-1 except...  
**TYPE:** Valve-based extreme distortion pedal

**BLACKSTAR HT-DRIVE OD-1**  
As HT-Dist DS-1 except...  
**PRICE:** £89  
**TYPE:** Valve-based overdrive pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Gain, tone and level pots  
**CONNECTIONS:** Input, high and low outputs

**BLACKSTAR HT-BOOST BT-1**  
As HT-Dist DS-1 except...  
**PRICE:** £89  
**TYPE:** Valve-based boost pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Boost, bass and treble pots

HT-DISTX DX-1	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** The wonders of the ISF control are never better illustrated than here
- **WE DISLIKED** Not so versatile, but it does what it does very well

HT-DRIVE OD-1	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Very simple to use, buckets of level and drive, effective tone control
- **WE DISLIKED** Could be a tad too gainy for what many players regard as 'overdrive'

HT-BOOST BT-1	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** The clean boost is excellent
- **WE DISLIKED** Considerable size and weight on your pedalboard, plus the extra hassle of the (albeit included) 16V PSU

## The rivals

Damage Control	
Womaniser	£199
Vox Dual Overdrive	£149
Radial Tonebone Classic	£199
Hughes & Kettner Tube Factor	£215
BOSS OD-20 Drive Zone	£149

Damage Control also produces a range of multi-function valve-based pedals and we'd recommend the Womaniser as arguably the most tonally versatile. The effortlessly cool Vox Cooltron range of pedals each includes a 12AU7 tube into the mix, with the Dual Overdrive allowing you to utilise two wholly different tones in one box. We've been taken by the sheer quality of the Radial Tonebone range, with this open-ended option using an efficient design and a single 12AX7 valve to great effect. If you enjoy classic sixties and seventies valve tones, this is for you... In a desire to be different, the extremely versatile H&K pedal lights up blue rather than red and can be used either as a stand-alone overdrive or a booster. A pair of modes offers a wealth of drive tones and it's a nicely compact unit too. Although wholly solid-state, the BOSS deserves a mention here simply because of the quality and diversity of the tones it offers. It models a number of classic stompboxes and is a cinch to use.

place to be as a guitarist. With the tone controls set to the middle and the boost control to around three it effortlessly gives a huge volume hike to a clean tone without colouring your sound: of all the pedals this one retains your amp sound most faithfully. Country, funk, blues and indie fans, your search for a natural clean boost may well be over.

If your amp is already driving at the preamp stage, the HT-Boost adds to party, encouraging more compression and sustain, whereupon the bass and treble controls can be used to temper or indeed exacerbate the drive characteristics of the low and high end. Think of it as a higher fidelity MXR Micro Amp with tons more flexibility and you're not too far wide of the mark.

## Verdict

This is an excellent range of pedals that boasts high build quality across a spectrum of boost, 'drive and distortion gain levels. This review should point you towards the two most likely to suit your style, so go and try them and make your choice. Their names can be a tad misleading; the overdrive can produce an aggressive rock tone, the DistX a nicely subtle drive and so on. It really depends on how you use them.

The best value unit is probably the HT-Dual, simply because of the wealth of tones on offer and the breadth of parameters available, not least the genuinely useful ISF function. At the excellent price of £139 any player who needs any level of gain should try one out as soon as possible.

The HT-Boost's performance depends entirely on what you partner



it with. It's just the ticket for a toneful clean boost. As for the remainder, each has plus points that vastly outweigh any perceived downsides and, as we've suggested, you're best served giving them a test drive to 'feel' the right gain level for your playing style.

Now the ultra-versatile and valve-driven Mesa/Boogie V-Twin is but a distant memory, the stage is set for Blackstar to fill that niche of top quality valve pedals and, at these prices, you'd be doing yourself a disservice if you didn't dive in with both feet. **B**

### Blackstar HT-Dual DS-2

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Blackstar HT-Dist DS-1

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Blackstar HT-Dist DX-1

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Blackstar HT-Drive OD-1

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Blackstar HT-Boost BT-1

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★