

First Impression
A handsome range of super-rugged overdrive and boost pedals
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Northampton-based firm Blackstar has already impressed us no end with its Series One and Artisan amplifiers. Now they've added a range of valve pedals. Review by Huw Price

Blackstar

HT-Boost, HT-Drive & HT-Dual pedals



FACTFILE

HT-BOOST

Specs: UK-made clean boost/overdrive valve pedal with tough metal chassis and 16v external power supply

Controls: Boost, Bass & Treble

Price: £89

HT-DRIVE

Specs: UK-made valve overdrive pedal with metal chassis and 16v external power supply

Controls: Gain, Tone & Level

Price: £89

HT-DUAL

Specs: UK-made two-channel distortion/clean boost with metal chassis and 16v external power supply

Controls: Gain, Bass, Middle, Treble, ISF & Level

Price: £139

Contact: Blackstar

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www.blackstaramps.co.uk

Blackstar pedals aren't just stylish – they're as sturdy as they look. The chassis are metal, and the Russian ECC83 dual triode valves peeking through the tops are protected by metal covers. The metal knobs slide firmly onto metal-shafted pots, the footswitches and output jacks are tough, and the printed circuit boards look almost unbreakable. Just one look at the power supply sections convinced me that Blackstar takes pedal building very seriously indeed.

Each pedal has a high-quality buffered bypass, as Blackstar says that 'only soft switching and a buffered bypass signal will give absolutely silent switching in high-gain applications'. This also lets you drive long cable runs or chains of other effects. Blackstars also have 'fully specified' speaker-emulated outputs modelled on a 4x12" cab.

But are those valves just for show? It doesn't seem like it. A 16v power supply is provided with each pedal, and inside the voltage is bumped up to 300v DC for the HT supply – so the valves are operating at full voltage, just as they would in an amp, rather than in starvation mode.

HT-BOOST

Some players use boosters as line drivers to run lots of pedals or long cables; others recognise that a boost can help normally-powered pickups push the front end of a valve amp into overdrive. The HT-Boost, the only Blackstar pedal without a speaker-emulated output, cleverly does both – and its effective all-valve 'cut and boost' EQ circuit has Bass and Treble controls, so it can be used for straight EQ as well as boost or overdrive.



The HT-Boost's tone controls let you sculpt the sound without the extreme colouration of many vintage-style treble boosters

Treat the HT-Boost like part of the amp and you'll find top quality overdrive, crystal-clear harmonics and willing sustain

The key to using the HT-Boost is understanding the two output levels. The manual says the Low output is designed for connection to other pedals or solid-state amps, but the Boost control is almost like an on/off switch, with a gain hike so enormous that I could only use the HT-Boost for clean-ish sounds with my Fender Deluxe if I used the Low output.

The best way of using the HT-Boost is to treat it like an integral part of the amp. Connecting the High output to the Deluxe was a hair-raising experience, in a good way, giving natural valve overdrive at reasonably low volume levels. You can balance the Boost control with the amp's

volume control to find the sweet spot at any level – and when you do, you'll get top quality overdrive, crystal-clear harmonics and willing sustain.

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality18/20
Playability16/20
Sound18/20
Value for money19/20
Vibe18/20

TOTAL**89%**

Good for... clean boost/overdrive with powerful EQ and slightly beefed up mids
Look elsewhere... for absolute tonal neutrality

THE COMPETITION

DURHAM ELECTRONICS

Sex Drive

This pedal has a more transparent hi-fi quality, but the HT-Boost is fatter and a bit more powerful and flattering

RRP: £179

RADIAL

Tonebone Classic

An overdrive with a valve inside that acts as a driver rather than a distortion stage, but it sounds smooth and sweet

RRP: £249

SEYMOUR DUNCAN

Twin Tube

A true bypass valve pedal with a sound that gives more of a transparent blues/rock vibe rather than all-out metal

RRP: £199

HT-DRIVE

Gain, Level and Tone; simple enough, but the tone control has a 'unique Class A circuit'. Sneakily, we thought we'd find out if the HT-Drive works without its valve, as some 'valve' distortion pedals do: no, this one doesn't, but that warm amber glow does come from an orange LED placed below the valve heater.

The HT-Drive represents the milder end of Blackstar's distortion range, but it still has a nasty side. Minimum Gain gives a hint of overdrive, and things fatten up quickly with a slight twist of the control. At full tilt you get pure filth, but it's never harsh or edgy. Even at high Gain, pickup settings retain their individual identities, though the HT-Drive does impose a thickening of the midrange - which is good for powerchord or lead sounds.

At higher Gain settings you'll experience a loss of transparency typical of multi-stage valve amps, and like many comparable pedals it doesn't clean up very well from the guitar volume control. With the Gain set lower, though, the HT-Drive behaves very much like a high-quality valve amp, and you'd be hard pushed to find an overdrive that's more dynamic and responsive to play.

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality18/20

Playability16/20

Sound17/20

Value for money19/20

Vibe18/20

TOTAL88%

Good for... rock-oriented overdrive sounds

Look elsewhere... mildly overdriven bluesy tone

The HT-Drive behaves much like a quality valve amp. You'd be hard pushed to find a more dynamic, responsive overdrive



The HT-Drive's tone controls are inspired by Blackstar's research into the high-frequency power amp response of Class A amps

HT-DUAL

This is a full-on distortion pedal with quite a few tricks up its sleeve. The two channels are voiced for rhythm and lead, and as well as three basic controls - Bass, Middle and Treble - the EQ also carries Blackstar's Infinite Shape Feature or ISF, a special circuit designed to shift the response of the tone circuit between the US/British Bassman/Marshall templates, and also to provide all the sonic characteristics in between.

The manual suggests starting with the EQ set flat (12 o'clock), and the idea is to use the Bass, Middle and Treble to get your basic sound, then to fine-tune the result using the ISF control. This method works very well, and the best thing about the HT-Dual is that you're not tied to any particular sound. Counter-clockwise on the ISF creates an edgy metallic crunch that I'd associate with American high-gain amps, and at the other extreme the sound is meatier and thicker.

Channel 1 has a Clean/Crunch switch, so you can actually run the HT-Dual as a clean channel. It's certainly powerful enough to provide a clean boost. Crunch mode covers everything from overdrive to metal rhythm styles, and the EQ section is extremely effective. Channel 2 shares the same EQ, but it's voiced for a thicker, creamier result, with more distortion if you need it. I'd guess that most players would use this channel for soloing or perhaps a darker metal vibe.

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality18/20

Playability19/20

Sound17/20

Value for money19/20

Vibe18/20

TOTAL91%

Good for... metal and hard rock style distortion. Also useful for direct recording

Look elsewhere... softer valve overdrive, straight through transparency

VERDICT

Three fine pedals - tough, practical and useable. The HT-Boost isn't quite as transparent as certain other clean boosts on the market, but it does provide a hint of extra power and it's very versatile indeed. The HT-Drive is a very accomplished valve overdrive with a stylistic leaning towards rock rather than blues; it might not be the logical choice if you're already content with your amp's overdrive sound, but if you're not, then you really need to try it. The HT-Dual can dish up just about any rock or metal distortion you can imagine, and it's also a useful clean boost with a powerful EQ section that provides the radical tone-mangling potential of the best modern high-gain amps. It sounds awesome through an amp, and the speaker emulation is certainly good enough for direct recording so long as you're happy with the sound of a 4x12" cabinet.



Amp designers achieve American or British voicings by adjusting component values. The ISF does much the same at the twist of a knob