

Fancy some HomeBrew?

GB'S FIRST LOOK AT AMERICA'S HOMEBREW ELECTRONICS FALLS IN THE CAPABLE HANDS OF **ROB W JACKSON**. HE ALSO TALKS TO COMPANY FOUNDER AND AMP-TECH TURNED STOMP BOX DESIGNER, JOEL WEAVER



Back when I started playing electric guitar you could count the number of established effects pedal manufacturers on one hand. Nowadays it seems we hear about another 'boutique' pedal brand every few weeks. Boutique in this context typically connotes 'made by hand', probably by one electronics whiz, in a shed somewhere deep in the USA.

However, unlike some of the smaller pedal peddlers, HomeBrew Electronics (HBE) can't really be considered a 'one man and his dog' operation: HBE consists of Joel Weaver, his wife Andrea, Terri Landreth and three hound dogs... Made up of players and self-confessed gear-nuts (even their attorney and sales rep play guitar) this seemingly jovial bunch of guys and gals are putting together some seriously interesting pedals. With their delightfully simple mission statement

to "offer a well-built, reliable product for a reasonable price", HBE's range of 11 pedals has already gained many admirers across the pond in their native US-of-A. We've a feeling they're about to generate a fair bit of interest over here, too.

CONSTRUCTION & FEATURES

No printed circuit boards or factory production lines at HBE HQ. Instead, when I spoke with Joel Weaver, he enthused about boxes that are drilled, painted and polished by hand with no automation whatsoever. Each pedal is then loaded with a point-to-point hand-soldered circuit board, and

GBINFO

HOMEBREW ELECTRONICS EFFECTS PEDALS

PRICE: £129-£169 (plus postage)

TYPE: Distortion, compressor and tremolo/preamp stompboxes

BUILT IN: USA

POWER: 9V PP3 battery or adaptor (not supplied)

CONTACT:

Audio Toyz (web sales only)

EMAIL: sales@audiotoyz.co.uk

WEB: www.audiotoyz.co.uk

GBINFO

HBE BIG D
PRICE: £169
TYPE: Overdrive/distortion stompbox
FEATURES: Gain, level, tone, diode selector, bigger, hard/soft switch.
FIVE MODES:
 1. Classic overdrive – tight and controlled.
 2. More output and gain than position one.
 3. More output and gain than position two, increased bass response.
 4. More output than position three, less clipping, open sound.
 5. Less output than positions one thru four verging on fuzz with slight compression.
DIMENSIONS: 53(h) x 122(w) x 92(d) mm

■ The HBE Tramp features speed, strength, gain, level and boost controls



GBOPINION

HBE BIG D GOLD STARS
 ★ Extremely flexible and versatile overdrive/distortion unit – with knobs on
 ★ Natural and open sound, especially in modes 1 & 2
 ★ Hard to find a ‘bad’ sound
BLACK MARKS
 ● Tone control could be labelled something else to avoid confusion; Battery access requires screwdriver; Some may not like location of power input
IDEAL FOR...
 Anyone who wants/needs a mega-flexible overdrive/distortion pedal that’s up there with the best of ‘em

then wired with heavy-gauge, military-grade wire. Indeed, the workmanship and finish, along with the choice of quality components is first class – these groovy little boxes look and feel like they were built to last by someone who cares that they do just that. As is often the way with effects using generic cast aluminium cases, you have to completely remove the base plate to replace the battery. Also, the power input (which takes a 9V Boss-style centre-negative adaptor or similar) is situated adjacent to the input jack, which may give rise to the odd pedalboard logistics problem. Minor niggles aside, though, everything about these pedals has a reassuringly solid and professional vibe – they certainly don’t look or feel home-made or amateurish. All pedals come with true bypass switching as

term ‘transparent’, and we’re not talking about Perspex cases. What it means is a tendency for these fancy handmade pedals to compliment your existing tone, instead of processing the living daylights out of it beyond all recognition. In other words, even though your sound changes, sometimes quite radically, what you’re hearing still manages to sound like your guitar, your amp, and most importantly, you. So, armed with that bolstered sense of identity, let’s have a more detailed fiddle with each pedal, starting with the rather scary...

HBE BIG D

This is one of those rare occasions where I’ve actually been scared of a distortion pedal, apart from that time a moody singer-songwriter (aren’t they all?) threw one at me. Packed within its modest footprint, the Big D sports no less than four rotary controls, a five-way selector, a two-way toggle, two LEDs and two footswitches! Deep breath... The gain control varies the amount of overdrive/distortion as you’d expect and the level control sets the overall output. The tone control had us a little confused because it works ‘backwards’; ie. turning it up, reduces the treble and increases the bass response. It sounds more like an active sweepable filter to me than a simple passive tone circuit. It has a well-tuned and musical range from retro fuzzy fizz, through what

sounds like a slight mid-boost, to a satisfyingly enhanced low-end thump. The ‘bigger’ control and footswitch offer an additional preset gain boost for lead boosts, etc – very handy. Next up we have no less than five different gain structures to play with. The five positions are listed in the spec box, see left.

We start off with fairly subtle, smooth and warm-sounding overdrive in positions 1 and 2, classic distortion in position 3, and then very modern hi-gain sounds in positions 4 and 5. This is certainly not a harsh-sounding device: even the high gain settings sound remarkably open and natural. However, we are most impressed with the touch-sensitive and natural sounds available in positions 1 and 2.

Next up, there’s a clip switch that

■ The choice of quality components on all of these HBE pedals is first class



you can set to soft or hard. According to the manual, this alters the dynamic response of the clipping section, but only for modes 1 to 3. ‘Hard’ denotes increased output and reduced clipping, while ‘soft’ denotes less output and more clipping. It’s a neat way of tightening up, or compressing the sound if needed without having to pile on more gain. Personally, I prefer the hard/less compression setting for the most part, but if it’s all a bit clanky or angular sounding you have the option to round it all out.

Having all these controls seems a tad overwhelming at first, but once plugged-in, the Big D makes a lot of sense, very quickly. Fortunately, and unlike a lot of ‘bells and whistles’ distortion boxes, it’s hard to find a

“ONE OF THOSE RARE TIMES WHEN I’VE BEEN SCARED OF A DISTORTION PEDAL”

standard too. So far so good.

Joel claims that because every pedal is completely handmade, each is unique and has its own personality. Personally, I like not sounding like the next guy – after all, what’s the point of getting on the radio, if nobody realises it’s you?

With boutique pedals, we often hear the



GBRATINGS	
HBE BIG D	
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★★

sound that's unusable or too extreme. That's another testimony to good design and there's clearly a great deal of thought as well as electronics packed into this little orange box. What's more, the controls on the Big D are very interactive, and that's very much part of the fun of dialing in a sound.

HBE CPR COMPRESSOR RETRO

After the Big D, it's a relief to be greeted with just two knobs here, namely sustain and level, the former effectively increasing the amount of compression/sustain, but also the overall gain. This is normal with this sort of design, and the separate level control enables you to balance the relative volume as the pedal is switched on and off.

Now, compression is a funny old business. It's perhaps one of the easiest effects in principle to understand, i.e. it just sort of smoothes things out and makes your loud stuff quieter and your quiet stuff louder, giving the



impression of added sustain. However, many guitarists find one of the most difficult effects to use effectively.

Unless you're going for a really major squishing effect – think early Byrds Rickenbacker guitar sounds – subtlety is the key, especially with the less 'in your face' design we have here. According to the manual, the CPR was "modelled after a coveted vintage compressor circuit", which we'll confidently assume to be the now legendary grey ROSS design. The initial impression is that the CPR



■ The Big D's controls may initially seem overwhelming, but it all soon makes sense

"THE CPR COMPRESSOR RETRO PEDAL TRULY SHINES AND IS NOW MY FAVOURITE COMP-STOMP"

TONE WEAVER

MEET JOEL, BOSS AT HBE

■ We asked HBE top dog Joel Weaver how and why he got into designing and building guitar pedals. Here's what he had to say...

"I was working in a music store as an amp tech. I started building a few pedals for some of the guys that worked there. We gave most of them away or sold them for next to nothing just to see what everybody thought of them. Pretty soon, complete strangers were coming up to us and asking us to build a pedal for them – 'Can you do it in this colour? Can you do this mod?' And so on. We then hooked up with our sales rep and things grew from there. We finally had to go to full-time after attending our first NAMM show in 2001."

is pretty much doing what it says on the tin in a very pleasing ROSS-like, subtle and transparent way. As with all the HBE pedals, sound quality and signal to noise ratio is top notch; compressors can be notoriously noisy and hissy pedals, especially at extreme settings, but the CPR is one of the quietest. That means you can run the CPR after the Big D overdrive to obtain some smooth and singing Stevie Ray and Gilmour-esque lead tones: lovely.

The range of compression available is impressive in contrast to similar



GB RATINGS

HBE CPR COMPRESSOR RETRO

BUILD QUALITY: 5/5

FEATURES: 4/5

SOUNDS: 5/5

VALUE FOR MONEY: 4/5

GB VERDICT: 4/5

GB INFO

HBE CPR COMPRESSOR RETRO

PRICE: £129

TYPE: Compressor stompbox

FEATURES: Sustain, level

DIMENSIONS: 53(h) x 122(w) x 92(d) mm

GB OPINION

HBE CPR COMPRESSOR RETRO

GOLD STARS

- ★ Sounds and feels fab
- ★ Extremely transparent tone
- ★ Usable and good range of compression effect
- ★ Super-quiet in operation – added bonus of placement in effects chain options

BLACK MARKS

- Battery access and power jack location again

IDEAL FOR...

Anything from a slightly compressed boost to full-on chick'n pick'n squish: simply superb

designs, where you can find yourself wishing for more or less from the sustain control. Quite often with a compressor, you'll find a 'sweet spot', yielding a subtle smoothing effect, adding sustain without any obvious loss of dynamics or attack, especially when you really dig-in. For me and my old Telecaster, this was with the sustain control at around 2 o'clock and the best way I can describe it, is as something you feel more than hear. I have to say, used in this way, the CPR truly shines and is now my personal favourite comp-stomp, without doubt.

HBE TRAMP

Now this is an unusual dual-function pedal and Joel Weaver openly admits that this may not be for everyone. The Tramp is a combined tremolo and preamp, no less (Tramp – geddit?), that's also capable of generating basic overdrive sounds. Tremolo, that classic pulsing/amplitude effect, has been widely used over the years not only because it can sound hugely atmospheric (think intro to 'How Soon Is Now' by The Smiths), but also because the effect was commonly built into amplifiers. As a result, many pedal manufacturers try to emulate the same kind of sounds heard from vintage-style all-tube amplifiers. Well, that's not why this lady is a Tramp, and as Joel

says, "It's not your daddy's trem". But a trem it still essentially is, so as you'd expect, there's a speed control which varies the rate over a huge range. The 'strength' control not only varies the depth of the effect, but also the intensity and attack. At very low settings, the effect is a softer, more traditional throb, but very quickly, perhaps a little too quickly for my taste, the sound becomes sharper and more pronounced – that helicopter-type stuttering guitar heard on REM

GB INFO

HBE TRAMP

PRICE: £139

TYPE: Tremolo and preamp stompbox

FEATURES: Speed, strength, gain, level, boost switch

DIMENSIONS: 53(h) x 122(w) x 92(d) mm

GB OPINION

HBE TRAMP

GOLD STARS

- ★ Something a bit different
- ★ Great for more aggressive/modern trem sounds
- ★ Tremolo often means level drop. Not any more...

BLACK MARKS

- Battery access and power jack location yet again; Maybe a bit too different? Trem lacks subtlety at times

IDEAL FOR...

A more radical tremolo sound with the added lo-fi vibe of integrated overdrive. 'How Soon Is Now?'

DETAILS

HIGHLY IMPRESSIVE PEDALS, WELL UP THERE WITH ALL THE BOUTIQUE BRANDS



■ Top-notch fixtures and fittings adorn these pedals, perfectly suiting their overall aesthetic



■ Tremolo and boost makes the Tramp a unique stompbox



■ Lots of controls for tons of tones: a brilliant all-round distortion box

GBCONCLUSION

WITHOUT DOUBT UP THERE WITH THE VERY BEST OF THE BEST

■ We're highly impressed with what we've seen so far from HBE, both in terms of products and also general company philosophy and service.

Speaking personally, of the three pedals, I decided my life wouldn't be complete without the gorgeous CPR compressor. For those more into distortion sounds and for anyone without a long-standing love affair with more vintage-style tremolo, the other two will look extremely tempting too. There are another eight effects in the current range, plus talk of an analog delay hopefully by the end of the year, and maybe even a tube amp from HBE in the not too distant future. Based on the quality and tone of this trio, we'll all be watching out for those. Great job, HBE folks. **GB**

GBRATINGS

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

FUN FINISHES

YOU WANT INDIVIDUALITY?



■ For an extra £20, there's also a dazzling array of custom finishes available.

You have a choice of various colour chequer board designs, to a 'tweed' amp-cloth type look. As the quality of standard finishes is so high, it's definitely a fun option to consider if you fancy something a little bit different.



recordings springs to mind here.

The preamp section features a gain and level control which work in a fairly standard way. If you want more overdrive, up the gain, and set the output level lower. For less overdrive, peg the gain right down, and up the output level. If you need more gain and overdrive there's a toggle boost switch that kicks in a bit more oomph. As for the overdrive sound itself, we're talking fairly unrefined and unsophisticated grit which is best used in moderation. In fact, used in this way, with the strength and speed controls almost all the way down, you can get a passable imitation of a classic little trem-equipped tube amp on the verge of breakup – not bad at all for one pedal.

Finally, control-wise, there's a footswitch to turn the trem on and off while leaving the preamp on, which means you could use the Tramp as an extra gain channel in your set-up. I started off playing with the Tramp thinking, 'sorry, I just don't get it, and I'm not going to like you'. After a while, though, her undoubted charms started to warm the heart.