



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



## The Rivals

There's an ever-growing choice of high-quality yet competitively-priced processors available these days. The **DigiTech RP-500** (£285) features no less than 125 effects models and **Line 6's POD HD300** (£259) is easy to use and sounds great. The **BOSS ME-70** (£275) includes amp tones from Roland's COSM technology and an onboard treadle.

range from Knopfler's echoey Sultans Of Swing tone to the roar of Slayer's Raining Blood.

The rear panel includes a master volume pot and a four-way amp/line switch that compensates the output signal's general EQ and bottom end response to suit the specific amp you're plugging into. You have the option of Vox (for Vox amps), F (Fender – best suited to cleaner tones in open-backed combos) and M (Marshall – for more Brit-flavoured amps and closed-back cabinets). If you're recording direct, select the Line position and tweak it to taste with the Tonal Equalizer.

Another useful feature is the inclusion of two one-inch internal speakers. The grilles are sited between the four footswitches and while they won't win any awards for their tone – heavy sounds mush into compost, while everything else sounds too tinny – it does mean you can literally plug in and play if you need to.

The overall learning curve is modest enough and once you get the hang of the specifics of the EX, it's easy to construct and edit a huge selection of contrasting tones.

## Sounds

Can a vacuum tube really have any effect within a digital effects processor? This one is run at low voltage (and is back-lit to mimic the familiar orange glow); moreover it's used not in the preamp section, but in the output stage and is

# Vox ToneLab EX £287

The evolution of the Valvetronix range continues with this new and expanded floor-based amp, cabinet and effects modeller *by Simon Bradley*

**T**he Valve Reactor circuitry at the core of the Valvetronix units is seen by many as the reason why they're among the more realistic attempts to digitally recreate valve amp characteristics. While the first ToneLab was a simple yet usable desktop modeller, later versions, not least this new EX, put the technology into a stage-ready floorpedal.

The EX features the same choice of amp models and infrastructure as the existing ToneLab ST. Each of the 11 amps are further split into three banks – Standard, Special and Custom – which provide further incarnations of the model in question. For example, the AC30 option can be set to model the classic Top Boost, the hand-wired AC30H2 or the Brian May signature, the latter complete with treble booster. We'll address their tonal accuracy later, but that makes for 33 different tonal bases.

They're selected by a rotary pot and from the same knob, you can also access one of the choice of standalone pedals. These are based on classic overdrive, distortion and fuzz

stompboxes, such as the Vox Tonebender, EH3 Big Muff Pi and Marshall Guv'nor, all digitally modelled within the amp itself. Choose one of the 11 cabinet models and you're ready to go. Out of the box, selecting a specific model automatically assigns the appropriate cabinet (the AC30 model is automatically married to the AC30 2 x 12 cab, for example), and the demo on this month's CD shows how to employ different cabs, with some interesting results.

There are a further four blocks of effects to consider, comprising a choice of 11 stompboxes that include an acoustic emulator and ring modulator, 11 modulation effects and a quartet of delays. Each section also possesses either a specific parameter edit knob or a tapered select knob that allows you to edit the assigned effect and, once your tone is ready, simply press write, select a patch, then hit write once again to save.

Two modes, Stomp Box or Program Select, add to the EX's versatility and you can assign the onboard treadle to any number of functions, be it a

traditional wah or volume control, or to regulate the speed of certain modulations in real time, such as rotary speaker simulator speed, for example. Deciding on what mode to use will depend on which of the associated features work best for you. Program Select mode, as well as allowing you to scroll up and down through the banks in the usual manner, gives access to certain parameters in real time, such as the delay tempo. Stomp Box mode addresses one of the issues we had with the ST, in that you can now select the individual effects dialled into the pedal two, modulation, delay and reverb blocks as you would with a stripped-down pedalboard.

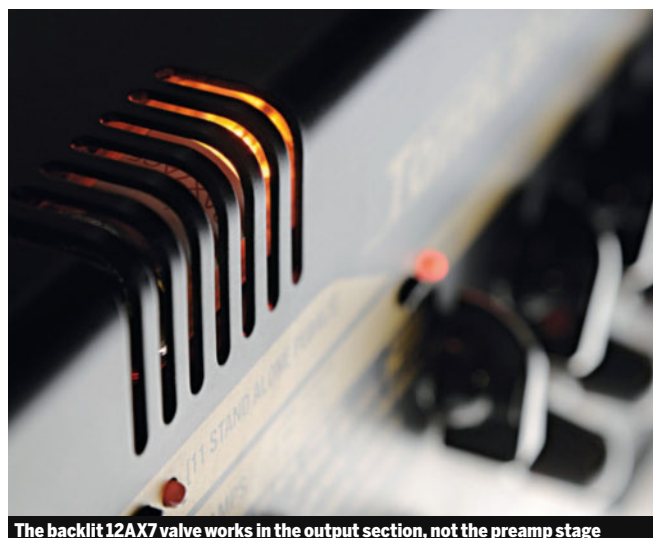
With 100 user patches and 100 factory presets, there's no shortage of storage space and Vox has also included a number of tones based on specific songs. Located in banks 26 to 38 they are, for the most part, adequately close, and choices

The learning curve is modest enough and once you get the hang of the EX's specifics, it's easy to construct tones





As before, the amp choice is broad



The backlit 12AX7 valve works in the output section, not the preamp stage

The Special mode will give you just the right spongy tone to grapple with Mark Tremonti's licks, if your fingers are up to it

designed to deliver a warmer, more responsive and valve-like feel. In our experience this is certainly the case.

The practical result is that it feels more like a 'real' valve amp under your fingers; the kind of pick response and varying levels of compression/bloom as you hit notes harder and softer. It's a feel attribute that was sorely lacking in early digital modelling, though to be fair has improved across the board with the latest generation products from all manufacturers.

This is especially apparent with the higher gain models. For example, the BTQ Metal model provides a wide choice of current metal-style tones and its Special mode will give you just the right spongy tone to grapple with, for example, Mark Tremonti's licks, if your fingers are up to it.

The EX is also up to scratch with cleaner sounds, with the Andy Summers song preset based on Message In A Bottle particularly ear-catching. And twiddling with the Cali Clean model, which in Custom mode models a modified 'Blackface' Fender combo, can bestow a suitably old school Keith Richards-style chordal chunk. It's great with a Strat's single-coils too – setting the amp gain to around seven and using the Tube OD model with low gain, produces mixed chime and

clarity with urgent drive – very close to John Frusciante's unmistakably enigmatic rhythm tone.

The amp/line settings have a significant influence on the tone and we find that, irrespective of what brand of amp we plug the EX into, setting the switch to Vox, F or M gives yet another layer of tones to play with.

The authenticity of the amp models in comparison to their real counterparts isn't as immediately obvious as when using, for example, Line 6's HD300. But with tweaking, dialling in a number of reasonably authentically vintage-flavoured tones into the EX is straightforward.

The downsides? Well, the internal valve does help to smooth out the tones and adds to the realism when physically playing though the unit, but the digital hi-fidelity never entirely disappears from the sound, a criticism that can be levelled at any digital modelling device. What it means in practise is that some of the more subtly overdriven tones in particular can be spiky and scratchy at times – especially the models based on amps from a certain English brand.

That said, don't forget that you're paying under £300 for a good stab at a vast array of sounds, all in one box.

## Verdict

There's no question that shelling out the extra cash for the EX over its ST little brother is well worth it, as it's more versatile, with an extended spec sheet and, if you take the time, it's possible to obtain some authentic and very different tones with it.

Do-it-all digital modelling devices such as this offer a staggering array of sounds, with maximum one-box convenience for very little money. Don't make the mistake of believing it will outperform your beloved boutique valve combo and £2,000 pedalboard in that rig's intended environment, yet for practising, playing at home, rehearsing and even the odd small gig, it makes much more sense. The onboard speakers might be gimmicky – surely headphones are better for practising? – but they don't detract from what is a well-spec'd, good sounding and good value unit. **A**

## The Bottom Line

**We Like:** Easy to use; versatile; Stomp Box mode; selected realistic valve characteristics

**We Dislike:** Onboard speakers don't sound great

**Guitarist Says:** An affordable and very versatile way of getting to know and use Vox's always-impressive Valve Reactor technology, whether on-stage or in the practice room



## Vox ToneLab EX

**PRICE:** £287.99

**ORIGIN:** Vietnam

**TYPE:** Valve-loaded floor pedal and FX modeller

**CONTROLS:** Amp selection, cab selection, standalone pedal selection, gain, volume, treble, middle, bass, reverb selector, pedal one selector, pedal two selector and edit knob, modulation selector and edit knob, delay selector and edit knob, tap tempo switch, reverb selection/amount, patch writing and exp pedal assign switches, output level knob, amp/line switching, patch up/down footswitches, pedal treadle

**AMP MODELS:** 33 types: Clean, Cali Clean, US Blues, US 2 x 12, Vox AC15, Vox AC30, UK Rock, UK Metal, US Hi-Gain, US Metal, BTQ Metal – each with three different tone options

**CABINET MODELS:** 11 types: Tweed 1 x 8, Tweed 1 x 12, Tweed 4 x 10, Black 2 x 10, Vox AC15, Vox AC30, Vox AD120VTX, UK H30 4 x 12, UK T75 4 x 12, US V30 4 x 12

**EFFECTS MODELS:** 45, nine simultaneously

**PATCHES:** 200 (100 User, 100 Preset)

**OTHER FEATURES:** 12AX7 valve, tuner, onboard treadle, two internal one-inch speakers, level pot, speaker level pot, amp/line switch, compatibility with ToneLab EX librarian software

**POWER:** 12V AC adapter (supplied)

**CONNECTIONS:** Guitar input, stereo/mono dual use output, aux in, type B, USB

**DIMENSIONS:** 394 (w) x 238 (d) x 82mm (h)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3/6.6

**RANGE OPTIONS:** Vox ToneLab ST (£215.99)

**Korg UK**

**01908 857100**

**www.voxamps.com**

## Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★