







Words Henry Yates

# DISTORTION PEDALS

**Log on if you're one of those 'straight-through-the-amp' types – this month's Group Test is for stompbox junkies who want to pimp their pedalboards**

**LET'S** hear it for hands: they pull the strings, fret the notes and throw the horns. But if all you do with your feet is tap out time, mount monitors and shoe the odd stage invader, then you're halving your body's potential to rock.

At this point, the more highbrow members of our readership will probably start muttering something about "favouring the organic break-up of valves" to "cheap outboard distortion". Their loss. From the boutique-style units through to more affordable additions to your pedalboard, the modern pedal marketplace is a fun-packed pick 'n' mix, where a

rainbow of sexy and savage stompboxes jostle for the attention of our size 10s.

No sector is more seductive (or more saturated) than distortion. From the moment that Roger Mayer built his first fuzzbox for Jimmy Page back in 1963, distortion pedals have been part of our lives. In 2011, there are so many models that stacking them up could recreate the Great Wall of China (possibly), which is cool, but also means it takes a special flavour of filth to get our attention and stop us going over to the multi-fx side. With four big names lining up for their shot, which will stamp its mark on the test?

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### VISUAL SOUND GARAGETONE CHAINSAW £59.99

**CALM** down, folks: despite evoking skin-masked lunatics chasing nubile teenagers in slasher movies, the Visual Sound blurb quietly reminds that the Chainsaw is “a unique and very musical distortion, in contrast to its name”. Oh well. At least the Chinese manufacture means this high-end US builder is able to shoot for “expensive boutique distortion” at sub-60-quid, and if the controls are thin on the ground – Drive, Tone and Volume huddled on a steel chassis with the much-coveted true bypass – then that’s exactly what you want on the road.

No prizes for features, then, so it all comes down to tone. First reaction: this pedal is an absolute killer paired with a single-coil guitar (we used a Tele). Spin the dials and you’ll hit a sweet spot that’s bang in the middle of the sonic spectrum, where the low-end is thumping, the mids are bringing warmth and colour, and the top end is scything through the mix, if not quite like a chainsaw then certainly like a hedge-trimmer. This unit’s lower-level gain is perfect for bringing understated attitude to blues runs and punchy alt country, but VS’s advice to pair it with a Drivetrain or V2 Route 808 is revealing, and the Chainsaw doesn’t quite convince as a pedal for screaming molten-metal leads.

10 years ago, you’d have killed to get this in your gigbag. Today, modelling units are threatening to make standalone distortion pedals an endangered species... but the Chainsaw can still cut the mustard.

#### AT A GLANCE

**TYPE:** Distortion pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Drive, Tone, Volume  
**SOCKETS:** Input, Output, Power  
**TRUE BYPASS:** Yes  
**POWER:** Battery, PSU (sold separately)  
**CONTACT:** Headline Music  
01223 874301 [visualsound.net](http://visualsound.net)



#### AT A GLANCE

**TYPE:** Distortion pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Gain, Tone, Volume  
**SOCKETS:** Input, Output, Power  
**TRUE BYPASS:** Yes  
**POWER:** Battery, PSU (sold separately)  
**CONTACT:** Source Distribution  
0208 962 5080  
[jetcityamplification.com](http://jetcityamplification.com)

### JET CITY SHOCKWAVE DISTORTION £50.99

**WITH** Mike Soldano in the cockpit, Jet City’s valve amps invariably prick up ears at TG Towers, but his pedals have so far been more of an enigma. The Shockwave Distortion’s vibe couldn’t be more minimalist, so it probably won’t do much for the superficial young filth fan who craves buttons and bleeps, but to mature players, there’s something weirdly reassuring about its skeletal layout of dials and its bullish sales shout-out to “serious and versatile guitarists”.

So, no, the Shockwave doesn’t do much, but it does it damn well. With a Gain control that raises the temperature by degrees, there are shades of the Chainsaw in the one-knob tone-shaping concept, but

we prefer this unit in practice. Tested with a humbucker electric, there’s a really strong vintage crunch to the lower-end distortion, and to these ears it works best when you roll back the tone control and crank out some big, British-

sounding bottom-heavy riffs. That said, for a unit that looks so dull, it’s refreshing to find that the Shockwave has a real split personality, bringing genuinely white-hot, high-gain sounds to the table when you start twisting.

Some distortion pedals paint themselves into a corner by trying to live up to their ridiculous names. This unit is different: it can do extreme, it can do subtle, it can lift a mediocre amp to supersonic performances. If you’re after no-nonsense distortion of real pedigree, investigate the Jet City.

SUMMARY	FEATURES				
	SOUND QUALITY				
	VALUE FOR MONEY				
	BUILD QUALITY				
	USEABILITY				
	OVERALL RATING	★★★★★			

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## BOSS POWER STACK ST-2 £100

**I**f we were giving points for nostalgia, the Power Stack ST-2 would romp home: it's the same iconic Boss brickette from our garage days, and even now it feels like the most roadworthy of the contenders. Still, £100 for a standalone, sole-purpose pedal is hardly an olde-world price, and the ST-2 needs to blitz its claims of "power akin to coveted tube amps and professional stacks".

Pedalboard junkies will be frustrated by the lack of true bypass, but the ST-2 gives a strong performance while the red LED glows. In Boss tradition, the controls are perfunctory – just a Level dial and two-band EQ – and the one you'll focus on is the Sound shaper, which takes your gain by increments from vintage fuzz to modern grind. We'd go along with Boss' claims that this pedal responds to picking intensity: stroke the strings and notes ring out clean, dig in and they break round the edges, and that's something we didn't get from all these pedals. It will suit expressive players, then, rather than robotic virtuosos.

As for tone, it's a non-committal thumbs-up. There's a killer performance at lower gain stages, with the ST-2 giving humbucker-equipped guitars that fat, frayed 'brown sound' of 60s Brit blues. That said, the "ultra-high gain modern distortion" touted when you crank the dial hard clockwise isn't savage enough (and makes singlecoils scream like a bitch). All in, the ST-2 is wholly professional and turns in a quality sound, but at £100, it's a purchase that won't stack up for everyone.



### AT A GLANCE

**TYPE:** Distortion pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Level, Bass, Treble, Sound  
**SOCKETS:** Input, Output, Power  
**TRUE BYPASS:** No  
**POWER:** Battery, PSU (sold separately)  
**CONTACT:** Roland UK 01792 702701 roland.co.uk

## AKAI DELUXE DISTORTION £69.99

**THE** distortion market has plenty of workhorses. You get the feeling that Akai's Deluxe Distortion fancies itself as a thoroughbred: a pampered pompadour that's too swanky to share a gigbag with the rest of your ghastly, plebeian pedals. And you must admit, the features do look top-drawer, with an analogue format, true bypass, array of tone-shaping dials, and even a Direct Rec switch that emulates amp output when you're going straight to the desk. But there's a twist: Akai has managed to keep this little lot under £70. For us plebs, things are looking up.

All those switches look like a headache – and they might be a little flimsy and fiddly for rough or dark venues – but operation in a controlled environment is

surprisingly intuitive, with your first choice being the EQ mode (Modern, Normal or Classic) and fine-tuning done via the Tri-Mode and High Cut switches and detailed EQ. You won't spend long chasing a cracking tone, though, as wherever you point the dials, this

unit's output is coloured by innate class. From the brown vintage warmth of the Classic setting, to the mid-scooped mentalism of Modern, this is both the best and the most versatile pedal we've seen today.

Don't be fooled by the pseudo-elitism. The features of this pedal might scream 'it's too good for the road!', but the competitive price tag whispers, 'Oh bugger it, it'll be fine'. A worthy winner.



### AT A GLANCE

**TYPE:** Distortion pedal  
**CONTROLS:** Level, Low, Mid Freq, Mid, High, Dist, Dir Rec, EQ, High Cut, Tri-Mode  
**SOCKETS:** Input, Output, Power  
**TRUE BYPASS:** Yes  
**POWER:** Battery, PSU (sold separately)  
**CONTACT:** Numark-Alesis 01252 896000 akaipro.com

SUMMARY	FEATURES								
	SOUND QUALITY								
	VALUE FOR MONEY								
	BUILD QUALITY								
	USEABILITY								
OVERALL RATING		★★★★★							



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