

Rothwell Audio Hellbender £139

A new stompbox range hand-built to last in the UK... by Chris Vinnicombe



Hellbender: much more than a Tube Screamer clone

YOU MAY remember the Rothwell Audio brand from issue 253's review of the Stompjuice pedal supply, or issue 258 when we gave the Hot Little Knob Strat tone circuit a Gold Award. The company has been around for a while making hi-fi products, but founder Andrew Rothwell has guitar effects pedal building experience stretching back nearly 30 years.

Everything about the Hellbender

oozes boutique quality, from the hand-polished and engraved housings to the internal wiring. Components are chassis mounted and hand-soldered via flying leads to the main PCB to ensure long term reliability, rather than merely constructing pedals in the most economically efficient manner; this methodology is a product of Andrew Rothwell's experience working for British Aerospace: "In the aerospace industry you don't want bits breaking off." Quite.

SOUNDS: So often we see boutique overdrives with volume, gain and tone controls that are Tube Screamer clones, so it's a pleasant surprise when plugging in the Hellbender to find that it is nothing of the sort. The range of the gain control goes from a touch-sensitive mild drive to a rich, full-bodied roar that works equally well for riffs as it does scorching lead runs. Clever design also

HELLBENDER	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Superb build quality; great sounds

■ **WE DISLIKED** May seem expensive to some, but you are paying for real quality

means that the circuit's two gain stages interact in such a way that eliminates bottom end flabbiness and keeps proceedings satisfyingly taut.

Verdict

£139 for an overdrive pedal may seem excessive to some in these days of £15 Chinese dirtboxes, but rest assured that the Hellbender is built with meticulous attention to detail and will withstand years of heavy gigging.

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★

KEY INFO: HELLBENDER | **PRICE:** £139 | **TYPE:** ANALOGUE OVERDRIVE PEDAL | **WEB:** WWW.ROTHWELLAUDIOPRODUCTS.CO.UK

Savarez 520 J Strings £10.95

Need a set of classic-sounding nylon ropes? Savarez should be on your shortlist... by Dave Burrluck



Savarez strings: they're pricey but worth it

LAST YEAR WE RAN A SERIES OF features on nylon string guitars and all their subtleties but realised that, while we may be seasoned hacks when it comes to steel strings, we were relative

novices in this new and exciting parallel guitar universe.

Savarez is a French brand that's been making strings since 1770 and is well known in nylon circles (it actually has just launched its first steel-string electric sets this year). The range is wide from Traditional sets, like the 520, to more modern Corum Alliance that use composite fibre top strings and Corum bass strings.

IN USE: We're now on our 10th set of Traditional 520 J 'yellow card' high-tension strings. They differ from many with their 'rectified' nylon top strings that have a slight texture, less slippery than the clear nylon treble strings. The extra tension, especially for plectrum players, gives a little more fight and to our ears more power – as if the string is making the soundboard work harder. We've also tried the more modern Corum 500 CJs, which are again high tension, and although the trebles are

SAVAREZ 520 J	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
In use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Traditional sound from a range with numerous tension and style options

■ **WE DISLIKED** Nearly double the price of a steel-string set!

clear and smoother the bass strings are still high tension but don't feel quite as 'tight', by design, as the Traditionals.

Verdict

We're not saying that these are 'the best' nylon strings out there but in our experiments, we've consistently gone back to these strings. Certainly anyone who's nylon-string guitar feels and sounds a little 'floppy' could do worse than auditioning a set of the 520 Js. They certainly produce a very traditional sound but bring out a new vibrancy and clarity to the instrument.

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★

KEY INFO: SAVAREZ 520 J & 500 CJ STRINGS | **PRICE:** £10.95 PER SET | **TYPE:** NYLON STRINGS | **WEB:** WWW.STRINGSANDTHINGS.CO.UK

AAD Cub AG-100 £329

Could this be the smallest serious acoustic amp available? by Mick Taylor

HEARD THE ONE ABOUT THE

100-watt acoustic amp that's a foot tall, seven inches wide, and weighs 11 pounds? It's no joke: it's AAD's Cub AG-100. American Acoustic Development is headed by Brit ex-pat Phil Jones, whose experience in hi-fi and studio electronics also extends to the compact range of PJB bass amps.

Despite the tiny dimensions, your basic electro-acoustic needs are covered via the rear panel's well-protected controls. The single channel offers a -10dB input pad, three-band

active EQ (+/-15dB at 100Hz, 1KHz and 10KHz) and a series effects loop. There's also a line out, tuner out and a low-impedance, balanced XLR out, but no pole-mount, parametric mid or anti-feedback circuit.

SOUNDS: Using guitars with B-Band A2 and Fishman Ellipse Blend systems for the test, it's surprising how much volume and spread the Cub kicks out, making any quality guitar sound credible. The physical dimensions – housing a pair of 95dB, five-inch 'Neo-Power' drivers – mean that getting the ideal mid-range response can sometimes be a fight for guitars with no on-board parametric EQ, or indeed less-than brilliant electronics in general.

Verdict

This is an able personal amp/monitor for electro-acoustic performances and it's



also gutsy enough for restrained bands, as long as you're not trying to outdo an acoustic drum kit and electric bass rig: hook it up to a PA for that.

There are some tonal compromises involved for this size, but the Cub is nevertheless simple to use, effortless to carry and pretty good value to boot.

You can carry it with one finger. Just about

ADD CUB AG-100	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ WE LIKED Ultra-compact design; easy to use	
■ WE DISLIKED No pole/stand mount; sweepable mid EQ would be good	

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★

KEY INFO AAD CUB AG-100 **PRICE:** £329 (+£29 FOR GIGBAG) **TYPE:** ACOUSTIC AMP **WEB:** WWW.SYNERGYDISTRIBUTION.CO.UK

Seymour Duncan Lava Box £99.95

It's orange, it's hot, and it might just make your sound erupt... by Chris Vinnicombe

THE LATEST ADDITION TO

Seymour Duncan's growing stompbox range is this molten beast of a fuzz. In addition to gain and volume, you get the six-position rumble knob, which adds progressively more low-end. Build quality is high as we expect from SD – including true bypass switching – although there's no quick way of changing the single 9-volt battery.

SOUNDS: The best adjectives to describe the Lava Box's sounds are 'thick' and 'smooth'. With the gain control in its upper reaches and one of the higher rumble settings selected, there's a tidal wave of monstrous, fuzzy

distortion on offer. In fact it's ideal for swampy, stoner-rock riffing: Kyuss, Melvins, Soundgarden and the like. The rumble control spans thin-ish and honky, through to way more bass content than some humbuckers can handle, so beware. Strat-style single coils benefit from the chunk, of course. The Lava Box is also very dynamic; turn down your guitar's volume and it cleans up almost musically – not normal at all for a fuzz pedal! It's not as aggressive as, say, a Big Muff, but then it's nowhere near as noisy either; background noise levels are perfectly good for a pedal of this nature.

Verdict

Tonal purists beware: the Lava Box stamps its authority all over your sound. Step on it and you might find that a previously timid Strat bridge pickup becomes a fearsome fuzz-rock monster.

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★

Want oodles of smooth, thick fuzz at your feet? Try this



LAVA BOX	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ WE LIKED An abundance of heavy fuzz; plenty of level boost	
■ WE DISLIKED Fiddly battery access, gets very bassy, very quickly	

KEY INFO: SEYMOUR DUNCAN LAVA BOX **PRICE:** £99.95 **TYPE:** ANALOGUE DISTORTION PEDAL **WEB:** WWW.SEYMOURDUNCAN.COM