

Big Fuzz, Big Voices

The Electro Harmonix Big Muff Pi with Tone Wicker and Voice Box

BEYOND THE FACT IT HAS created some of the most legendary signal-chain effects in the history of electrified guitars and basses, Electro-Harmonix has always had a great quirky side. Whether the brains there have a wicked sense of humor or if they simply tend to think outside the box, E-H has given us some cool offerings, whether they were fuzz boxes or super stanky envelope filters.

Two of E-H's latest, the Big Muff Pi with Tone Wicker and the Voice Box, continue in that vein – boasting very

different functions while remaining equally musical.

E-H has always excelled at making fuzz pedals. The Big Muff is renowned for its mountainous wall of grind. Yes, a bit of equalizing was/is requisite when one uses it – for instance, modern metal and heavy-rock players enjoy a scooped-mids tone with a sizzling high-end, and getting that with the Big Muff required some tweaking at the amp. Well, that was then...

The new Big Muff Pi with Tone Wicker is housed in the same classic box, but

with two new mini-toggles that contain its secret weapons. With the Tone mini-toggle in the Off position, the box proffers classic Big Muff sounds. Switching it on engages the three-position Wicker control, which is a high-frequency filter.

Live and in the studio, the Pi with Tone Wicker stands up well, and each position completely re-voices the pedal. This is a *tres cool* function, and for most players will solve the need for high-end response. Players who do metal or “industrial” will love the raspiness inherent with the Tone Wicker switch flipped all the way up.

Though this is a new beast, it preserves the classic Big Muff tone and function, but with cool new features. You may need to experiment with the Tone Wicker settings, though – especially with single-coils, as the extra sizzle can breed extra noise. The good news is that most who would use this are going to be playing at high volumes, so the noise may or may not be an issue.

Anyone who has used a harmonizer knows the devices can be a pain in the ol’ backside. Programming one’s key on the fly is not always the easiest thing to

E-H BIG MUFF PI WITH TONE WICKER/VOICE BOX

Price: \$882.25 (Big Muff Pi)/\$214.50 (Voice Box)
Contact: ehx.com.



do in live applications. Enter the E-H Voice Box.

Capable of creating two-, three-, or four-part harmonies in the same key as the instrument plugged into it, the Voice Box lets you double a vocal either an octave up or down. The Low and High harmony settings produce two harmony notes set at a third and fifth of the root. This is very useful, especially in small bands trying to cover multiple parts. And everything tracks very well, though lower-register notes can get a little warbly if triggered with a bass or keyboard. Particularly cool is the unit’s ability to store up to nine pre-sets, making it friendly in live situations. Throw in the additional onboard Reverb and Blend knobs, and you have a “choir in a box.”

The Voice Box also has a 256-band vocoder that alters the harmonic enhancement to resemble a male or female voice.

So, though these are two very different boxes, each has a ton of uses. Between them are tons of tones, tweaks, and musical landscapes to explore. – **Sean O'Bryan Smith**

Pocketful of Tube Tone

The Surprise Sound Lab Rock Block

BEING ABLE TO SHOW UP for rehearsal or a recording session with an amp that weighs two pounds has long been the dream of any Super Reverb owner facing a three-story walk-up, and Colorado’s Surprise Sound Lab has the answer for that dream.

Their Rock Block is a one-watt tube

amplifier that can drive any speaker/cab that runs four to 16 ohms and/or be used as a distortion pedal in front of another amp.

Built by veteran circuit designer Kim Hardee, who, being an acoustic guitarist for most of his life, grew weary of ringing ears after jamming on his 60-watt amp. So he experimented with a variety

of pedals and some five-watt amps, but wasn’t happy with their basic sounds.

Determined to build an amp with a half watt of clean power and one watt of distorted power, Hardee built four prototypes. In a year and a half of experimentation, he tweaked the circuit and was able to continually shrink its housing from 8" x 12" to a mere 3³/₄" x 5³/₄" thanks to a proprietary internal switching power supply that converts 12 volts DC to 320 volts DC.

The heavy-duty aluminum enclosure sports a blue powder-coated finish with baked-on epoxy lettering, chrome-plated brass burl control knobs, a true-bypass footswitch, metal rails to protect the tubes, an input jack, and separate output jacks for speakers or to drive another amp. The unit’s signal path uses Mallory 150M series capaci-

tors with silver mica capacitors for the EQ. One-percent metal-film resistors cohabit the custom-printed circuit board with two-ounce copper traces, and the ceramic tube sockets glow blue when the power is on, matching the paint. The circuit is all-tube, Class A single-ended triode, and controls include Volume, Tone, Gain, and Out Volume for using the Rock Block as a stompbox or with a DI for recording. Three-way switches for Bass and Boost complete the tone-shaping package. The Bypass footswitch is for use with the Rock Block as an overdrive/distortion pedal, and also serves as a standby when the Block is powering a speaker.

The Rock Block comes with three JJ tubes – an ECC82, an ECC83s, and an ECC99, but any 12A_7 tube can be used for the preamp or power tube, with dif-

SURPRISE SOUND LAB ROCK BLOCK

Price: \$389
Contact: surprise
soundlab.
com.



ferent tubes providing different tones. For example, the ECC99 provides about 50 percent more clean headroom than a 12AU7. The Volume knob controls the power tube

while the Gain controls the preamp tube. When used as a distortion pedal, the Rock Block provides output-tube distortion by using the internal output transformer and an internal speaker load.

Choosing a 1x12 cab with a Jensen P12N and plugging in a Grosh Electrajet with the company's own P90s, it was easy to get a clean tone by keeping the Gain at 40 percent or less, even with the Volume dimed, as long as the Boost was on the lowest of its three settings. From that point, the variety of tones was limitless. Dialing up the Volume brought out a gritty, power-tube distortion, while increasing the gain highlighted a more singing, violin-like sustain. Decreasing

the Bass one click every time the Boost went up a notch worked well to keep the tone clear. One of the most surprising elements of the Rock Block was the amount of bass it produces relative to its volume, and the tone knob provides a useful range of treble cut and boost.

Plugged in between the Grosh and a Victoria 5112, the Rock Block produced any and every type of distortion, from mild grind to violin tone to metal, and did it without extraneous noise. With the pedal's Volume on full and the Gain below half, the Victoria at one-quarter volume had the identical power-tube saturation with the Rock Block as it did without the pedal at full volume; it was just quieter.

Guitarists and roadies, rejoice! Chiropractors, find different patients! The two-pound Surprise Sound Lab Rock Block is not just a great-sounding practice and recording amp, it's a great sounding amp, period. — **Bob Dragich**

Elegant Tone Machine

The Eastman El Rey ER-1

SINCE 1992, EASTMAN HAS offered reasonably priced instruments with build-quality, style, and features that belie their status as imports. The most recent addition to increasingly varied line is the El Rey ER-1.

A unique take on the jazz guitar, the El Rey ER-1 is designed to be a hybrid between a hand-built acoustic and a great-playing jazz box. Like many acoustics, the full-hollowbody instrument has hand-carved mahogany back and sides with a solid spruce top. This is joined to a 25²/₅" mahogany neck using Eastman's patented neck-block joint and capped with an ebony fingerboard with inlay capped on the bass side.

Aesthetically, the ER-1 is immediately striking. From its unique shape (with Florentine cutaway) to its rich sunburst finish it offers a high-end appearance. Closer inspection reveals the detail in its hand-carved ebony tailpiece and pickguard, and our tester had nicely figured flame-maple binding on the body and headstock. Gold Gotoh tuners and a floating, intonatable Gotoh bridge round out the look. Throw in a Kent Armstrong HPAG-1

pickup with one Volume and one Tone control, and you have the makings of a very special instrument.

Picking up the guitar, the first thing one notices is the El Rey's body and the fact it weighs so little. The guitar balances extremely well whether played while sitting or strapped over the shoulder, and our tester had a superb setup, straight out of the box.

Even with no soundhole, the ER-1 offers surprising resonance and projection. In fact, its volume, even unplugged, is downright impressive. Its acoustic sound is reminiscent of early parlor-style acoustics or a small classical guitar, and one could use it acoustically in a small setting. Try that with other jazz boxes!

But this is an electric instrument, and its fine points come alive with the help of the "juice." If there's a word that best describes the initial tone, that word would be "rich"; mids are very pronounced and warm, and up-

per-range tones are not biting. The Kent Armstrong pickup perfectly suits the natural warmth of the instrument. Thanks to the combination of mahogany and spruce, the overall sound stays even in terms of both sustain and overall presence—kudos to Eastman for its choices, as using maple for the back, sides, or top would have made this instrument boomy and probably a bit brittle-sounding.

Designed for jazz, the guitar's wide, thin neck is extremely fast and comfortable both for lead and rhythm playing. The instrument's natural tone also needs very little EQ from an amp or mixing console. In most cases, it sounded best with the EQ settings flat through a good tube amp. This

guitar simply sounds too good to be this affordable.

Even though the El Rey oozes class, most musicians want an instrument that's versatile. That said, the fact this is a one-pickup axe shouldn't frighten rock and blues players. Thanks again to its construction, the El Rey offers an abundance of searing, "low-end" overdriven tones. Whether you're hitting a 12-bar shuffle or belting out rock riffs, it's not afraid of an overdrive pedal.

The Eastman El Rey ER-1 is just a great guitar. Its gallery-worthy appearance, coupled with its astounding tone, leaves precious little to be desired. — **Sean O'Bryan Smith VG**

EASTMAN EL REY ER-1

Price: \$1,695
Contact: 22525 Gateway Center Drive,
Clarksburg, MD 20871; (800) 624-0270;
eastmanguitars.com.

