



BSM Treble Boosters

TREBLE BOOSTER PEDALS HAVE a very colourful past, but do they have a future in this world full of high-gain amplifiers? Huw Price checks out a new range of old-fashioned booster pedals from German makers BSM...

Let's explode a myth. Back in the 'golden days', guitarists did not simply plug their vintage guitars into vintage amps and experience instant sonic contentment. Most rockers, in fact, felt the need for a little extra help. These days, while we all know about classic amps, guitars and even fuzzboxes, it seems that most people have forgotten about the secret ingredient of many a well-known rock guitar tone... the treble booster.

From the early 1960s onwards, many guitarists used treble boosters to extract every last ounce of gain and crunch from their amps. The user list includes most of the greats, and some guitarists – like Rory Gallagher and Brian May – actually never stopped using them. Back in the early-to-mid 1960s, if you had enough money for a decent amp, you probably bought yourself a Vox AC15 or an AC30. These were

great amps, but many players decided they needed more gain and frequency range to ensure that their lead playing cut through the rhythm section. Valve technology was bulky and required dedicated power supplies, so it wasn't until the widespread introduction of a new amplification device – the transistor – that it became possible to build battery-powered amplifiers in little metal stompboxes. Many companies jumped on this bandwagon, including Hornby Skewes, Arbiter and Orange.

In the modern guitar accessory market there's now both 'vintage' and 'modern' transistor technology, and a certain mystique has developed around the germanium transistors that preceded the silicon variety. Fans claim that germanium sounds 'warmer', 'smoother' and 'more musical' compared to the supposedly edgier, grittier sound of silicon.

Does this argument sound strangely familiar? I had a long conversation with a veteran pedal manufacturer a few months back on this very subject. With a wry smile and a twinkle in his eye, he suggested that the whole thing was way out of proportion. He also pointed out that germanium transistors were notoriously unstable and susceptible to temperature change... and that designers were delighted to ditch them when silicon transistors arrived.

Nevertheless, if you're going to produce an accurate and authentic recreation, using original components is paramount. These six BSM pedals are handmade in Germany and, to their credit, the company has actually sourced the germanium transistors used in the originals, and each one has been individually selected for performance.

BSM use the OC76 transistor in its recreation of the Orange Bass And Treble Booster, and the OC44 for their Dallas Range Master and Hornby Skewes copies. Actually, 'copies' is probably the wrong term, because BSM only set out to recreate the original circuits, not the packaging. All the units are built into identical rectangular metal boxes, much like the ones you would find at your local electronics parts supply shop.

Input and output sockets are located in the usual places on either side of the box. A plastic sheet with a rudimentary graphic is stuck to the top of each box and each comes crowned with a good old-fashioned metal footswitch. BSM pedals are unlikely to win any beauty contests, but that's hardly the point: they do have that

handbuilt 1960s vibe. These pedals are 'true bypass' units – meaning that when you switch them off, your guitar signal passes straight through without being corrupted by any tone altering circuitry. Personally, if I'm using long cable runs, I prefer to have a buffer amp between my guitar and amplifier to avoid volume and high frequency losses, because it's arguably the lesser of two evils.

Looking inside the boxes, construction is neat but the circuit itself is encased in a 'resin spilled block' that is intended to protect the circuit from shock and extremes of temperature. There's no socket for a wall wart supply, so be warned – these are battery power-only boxes. Picking up the trusty Strat and firing up the long-suffering Vox AC10, testing begins.

HS AND HS CUSTOM

RRP: HS £115, HS Custom £117

First up is this re-creation of the old Hornby Skewes pedal, originally produced between 1967 and 1969 and rumoured to have been used by Ritchie Blackmore on *Deep Purple In Rock* and *Made In Japan*. The HS Treble Booster is designed specifically for guitars with single-coil pickups, and adds bite and sustain at the expense of a little low-end depth. The



volume increase is actually quite dramatic, forcing the front end of the amp into an aggressive, crunchy overdrive. At the same time the slightly treble-shy nature of the Vox is replaced by a clear, Marshall-like chime – like a vintage Vox with EL34 tubes instead of EL84s. The whole package felt more responsive and easier to play, and I even found myself rolling off a little of the top end on the amp.

I did feel that the preset boost was a little excessive, so I was pleased to discover that the HS Custom includes a volume control on the side of the box: you can set, forget and stomp with impunity! The HS Custom incorporates the volume control modification that Blackmore used from 1974 onwards. The two pedals sound the same, but the volume knob on the Custom simply gives you more control.

RM AND RM METAL

RRP: RM £115, RM Metal £117

These pedals are BSM's tribute to the OC44 transistor Dallas Range Master pedal produced between 1965 and 1969. According to BSM's literature, this was the pedal Clapton used during his tenure with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers and with Cream (Rory Gallagher



was also a fan, as was Queen's Brian May). The RM and RM-Metal are designed for single-coil pickups and medium output vintage-style humbuckers, and produce a sound that is mellower and bluesier than the HS pedals. There's still a huge amount of crunch on tap, though, along with sweet sustain. Notes in chords are more clearly defined, and everything you play seems to have an extra degree of punch and tautness.

The RM Metal is modelled after the modified unit Tony Iommi used for Black Sabbath's *Paranoid*. The difference between this and the standard version is not that great, but the Metal version has extra bite and gain. Both units are also fitted with side-mounted volume knobs that allow you to control the amount of boost.

OR

RRP: £115

This pedal, based on an old late 1960s Orange Treble and Bass booster, is by far and away the most refined BSM I have tried so far. It takes the natural sound of the guitar and brings it to life in a way that proves highly addictive. Famous users of the original Orange pedal included Wishbone Ash's Ted Turner and Andy Powell, while David Gilmour also used one on *Umma Gumma*, *Meddle* and *Dark Side Of The Moon*. Although the OR does provide a preset broad-frequency gain boost, the volume jump is comparatively gentle and the emphasis is more

firmly on tone shaping. A side-mounted tone control sweeps from a slight treble cut to glassy, shimmering highs without ever sounding shrill or harsh. With a Strat, this pedal produces an instantly recognisable Pink Floyd sound, great for atmospheric chord work as well as clean, sustaining leadlines. Alternatively, you can set up your amp for overdrive then use the OR as a booster for solos or power chords.

BM-Q

RRP: BM-Q £117

There's bad news for the legions of guitarists playing in Queen tribute bands. Apparently, Brian May ditched his original germanium transistor Range Master pedal for a silicon model during Queen's middle period – so you'll need to buy two of these pedals to be fully tooled up.

BSM have recreated the later circuit in their BM-Q pedal, using silicon transistors to provide more bite and edge.

This pedal has no volume control, but still works very well, with a strong preset gain boost. The sound is quite different from the RM; there's tons more top end, aggression and cut. And sustain? There's loads of it.

If your guitar and amp already sound trebly then this pedal is probably not for you. However, any player with a Vox amp and a dark-sounding mahogany guitar with old-style pickups will probably like it a lot. Half a sixpence, anyone?



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VERDICT

When I started this review I was anticipating a difficult day trying to discern tiny differences between a bunch of pedals that all did essentially the same thing. How wrong I was! Each one of these units has a distinctive, classic and, dare I say, 'British' sound. Every time I plugged one in, I found myself smiling and thinking to myself, 'Ah! So *that's* how they got that sound...'

If you don't already like your guitar and amp, these pedals will do your sound few favours; BSM Treble Boosters are all about maximising the potential of your existing setup. If you have an old-style amplifier without a high-gain preamp – like a Vox, a Fender, an old Marshall or one of those 'boutique' jobs – these pedals could be just the ticket. Although I have reservations about 'true-bypass' pedals, these BSMs are designed to integrate with your setup and you are most

likely to leave them switched on permanently, thereby providing a buffer for long cable runs. The manufacturers also advise you not to place them in an effects loop, because BSMs are designed to perform their magic between your guitar and amp.

Superficially, these BSMs are only designed to do one thing. In practice, all these pedals provide you with the opportunity to drastically increase your tonal range using the volume control on your guitar and the onboard tone controls. The guitar's volume control becomes particularly sensitive, with the sound cleaning up dramatically between '10' and '9' with no apparent loss of high end or volume. Chords sound clearer, wound strings sound punchier and your whole setup will have more feel, sustain and response. All you need to do now is decide which one is right for you... and that could be a very difficult choice indeed.