



the RANGEMASTER... a look back at Britain's secret weapon

BY KENNY BARDIN So there I was in July of 1966 playing "drop the needle" on a new record that I had just purchased. It was John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton, and I was trying to learn every tasty morsel of Clapton's amazing licks. I still had the new Stratocaster and a Fender Super Reverb that I had purchased a few years before in 1964 and was becoming very perplexed by the sound Eric was getting out of his guitar.

I had heard fuzz before and ran right out and purchased a Maestro Fuzz when "Satisfaction" came out from the Stones. I was having a good time playing that, "500 lb Bee" by the Ventures and even "Blues Theme" from the Easy Rider movie by Davie Allen and the Arrows, but this was very different. The sound was bristling with harmonics and seemed to be always on the verge of feedback; it was smooth and fat rather than thin and buzzy.

Things only got worse by December of the same year when Eric formed Cream. On

the cuts, "N.S.U." and "Cat's Squirrel," as well as many other tracks on *Fresh Cream*, the guitar seemed to be on fire. This elusive tone would continue through the remaining Cream albums; later, when I was introduced to Les Paul guitars and Marshall amps my tone situation improved, but it still wasn't exactly the tone I was hearing.

Forward in time, I found myself opening for Deep Purple on one of their early tours. Ritchie Blackmore was always a favorite of mine, and I was in awe of his four 200 watt Marshall stacks that loomed heavily on the side of the stage. His guitar was fat sounding and had great sustain, but wait ... it was a Fender Stratocaster. They weren't *that* fat. I examined his guitar closely and found that the only modification I could see was a larger diameter tremolo bar. The pickups looked stock to me and there were not many replacement pickups for Strat available at this time. As I looked at his gear, to my surprise, I saw a Revox reel to reel tape recorder hooked up to his gear and it wasn't for recording. It

was in the guitar signal path. And what was that small blue rectangular box that said Hornsby Skewes sitting there? A fuzz perhaps? That was probably why he sounded so fat on a Strat.

Moving on in time, I found myself in a band trying to cop the solo for Judas Priest's "Another Thing Coming." There wasn't a problem with the notes and by then I had Marshalls and a rack full of the best processing gear, but their guitar sounded like it was so hot it was about to blow up. There must have been something connected to their guitars or amps that I didn't have. Possibly some kind of pedal? Then there was Brian May from Queen. AC30? Home-made guitar? Burns pickups? No way.

As the years went by, I would occasionally hear this tone or similar versions on records that I was listening to at the time, by artists like Rory Gallagher, Wishbone Ash and even a few early Beatles songs. The Hendrix era gave us many great pedals including the Fuzz Face, Octavia, Wah

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In the late '80s and early '90s, I began hearing rumors of a rare box or pedal-type device that was used on Clapton's early recordings. It was called a Dallas Rangemaster treble booster, and I set out to see if I could find one for myself. I was surprised to learn that not only could I not find one, there was not so much as a picture of one available. I even offered a small reward for a picture of one but no one could help me.

Confused by the rarity of this mythical pedal and the fact that it was called a treble booster, I didn't know if I was even on the right track. The sound I heard was not trebly and certainly Ritchie Blackmore could not have needed more treble from his Strat.

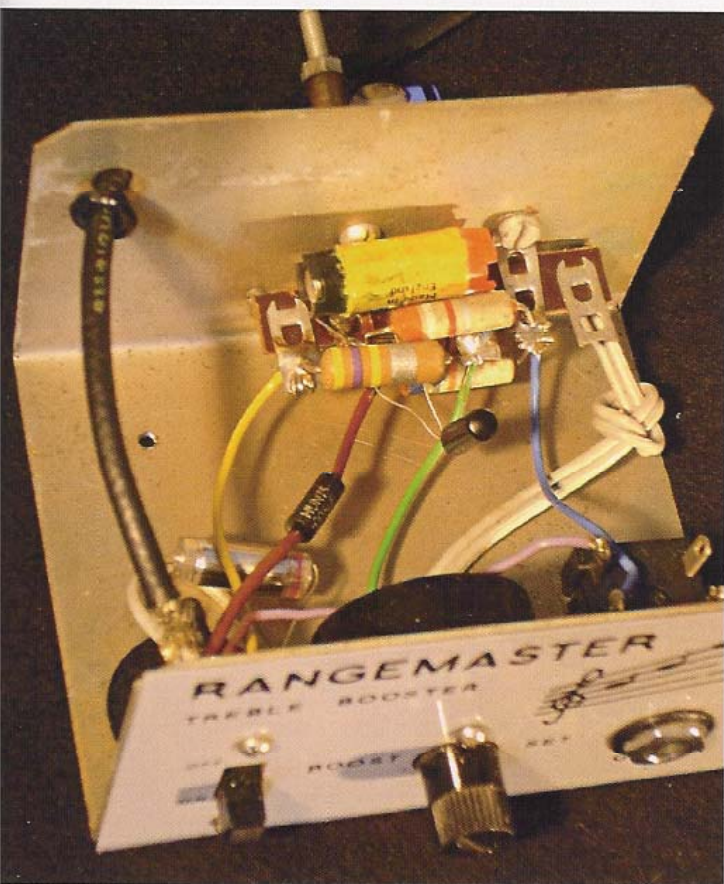
Then finally it happened. A friend from England called me and said he had found an obscure box in a shop in London called a Rangemaster. The shop owner wanted a bit much for it, but I bought it anyway. What finally arrived was a small, gray box with one switch on the front, one knob, a jack and a white cord hard-wired to the back. A

small brass thumb screw exposed a battery compartment, housing a battery I had never seen. I found out that it could be converted to a 9 volt and did so. The faceplate said Rangemaster Treble Booster and had a musical staff on it. The back plate stated, "Dallas Musical 10-18 Clifton st London EC-2."

So, I plugged it in, using an old 50 watt Marshall 2x12 combo and a Les Paul with PAF humbuckers and there it was. Through the crackle of old dirty pots, I found the tone that had eluded me since the '60s. Musical nirvana. After that fateful day, I managed to acquire a number of the units and figure out what makes them do what they do.

First off, I will say that no two of these units sound exactly alike. One of the first things I observed is that this unit is not a treble booster, in that it does not really boost treble, like a Vox Treble Booster or Electro Harmonix Screaming Tree. It is basically a frequency selective boost. The higher frequency you put in, the more DBs of boost you get. It certainly does get brighter, but not in the typical way. When played through an amp that is overdriving the low-end remains tight, but the higher you go, the sustain and gain is increased.

The Rangemaster is a lucky accident. The circuit is very simple, utilizing usually a Mullard OC-44 germanium transistor, although the OC-71 was also used. The single pot is usually 10K, but I have found some with factory 20K pots. It seems that in the original units the 20K is a bit hotter and gainier. There is no foot switch; switch-



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ing is accomplished by the small slide switch on the front. It is assumed that the player intended to leave the unit on or off, and it does in fact clean up when the volume is turned down.

There were other companies who tried to make similar units, but the other most notable was the Hornsby Skewes. This is the one I found on Blackmore's rig, pushing the first stage of his Revox tape deck. They are very similar to the Dallas; there is no volume on the Hornsby unit but it does have the slide switch, just like the Dallas. It should be noted that the Hornsby Skewes Treble Booster was designed to be a companion pedal to their Zonk Machine fuzz,



"modded," Ibanez Tube Screamer

apparently due to the fact that the Zonk needed a bit more treble, although many simply used the booster. I have heard that Blackmore had a pot installed on his to control the gain, but I did not see that at the time (although it was very early on).

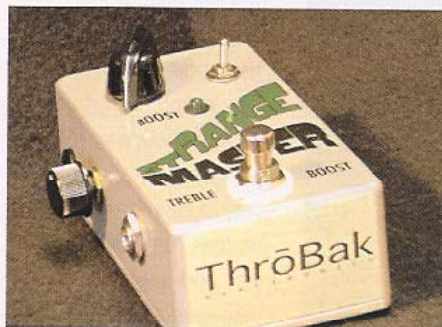
As time passed the Rangemaster faded



Keeley, Java Boost

"... there have been many clones of this pedal made due to the simplicity of its circuit."

into obscurity, with the advent of overdrive pedals such as the Ibanez Tube Screamer. These did a great job of overdriving the front end of amps, and are widely used today. Through the years, since the conception of the Rangemaster, there have been many clones of this pedal made due to the simplicity of its circuit. Some of them remain fairly true to the original and some are variations on the theme. Here is a partial list of the units available (including, but not limited to) see *Variations...*



Variations on a Theme

BSM (many variants)

- ThroBak Strangemaster
- Homebrew Germania and the Germania 44
- Robert Keeley Java Boost
- 65 Amps Colour Boost
- Diaz Texas Ranger
- Roger Mayer Concorde
- Pete Cornish treble booster
- Greg Fryer treble booster
- Pedal Doctor Queen Bee
- DAM Red Rooster
- Several models of the Brian May
- Expression pedals.

I have found that the units work best in front of an amp that is already overdriving, or in front of a pedal that is being pushed into further overdrive. Although there are certainly no rules on its usage, it does seem to prefer the circuitry of British amps. Newer Fender amps produce a less than pleasing sound for me unless a pedal is

also used, but tone is subjective. This may be because of the differences in the tone circuits in the amp (active vs. passive tone controls).

Now we have to address the question, "which one sounds best for me?" It is a hard question, as I mentioned that the original units vary from each other quite a bit. You may be looking for an original-sounding unit, or something more modernized. I tend to look at replicating the early Clapton tone; if that's your aim...

my recommendations are:

- the BSM HS Custom
- the HBE Germania 44
- the HBE Germania
- the 65 Amps Colour Boost.

For those who want a boost for more modern and aggressive styles, try:

- the HBE Germanicide
- the Keeley Java Boost
- the Gundry ThroBak Strangemaster.



Once again, I must stress that the opinions I have given here in regards to tone are very subjective. It's not what the gear sounds like, it is the sound you get out of the gear. Different players' touch has a great deal to do with the tone.

This brings me to a related subject: response. Some pedals (and even amps) have very little response of feel.



A note picked hard will sound only a bit louder than one picked softly, but what we are ultimately looking for is a different tone or timbre when picked at different hardnesses. The Rangemaster, in its original form, has this quality. It is extremely responsive, as are most of the older based clones. Some of the newer ones I tested were less so-so, but they perform admirably.

Well, there we have a bit of the history of this amazing pedal, perhaps one of the best kept secrets in the British guitar arsenal, as well as a look at some of the more modern (and available) alternatives for guitarists looking to improve their tone. Plug in those Rangemasters and Marshalls and let's play a rousing chorus of, "Steppin Out." 🎸