Dirt Box Shootout

by **zentropa** » 04 Nov 2015, 04:49

My primary board has 3 dirt boxes, each with a specific role in mind.

Just finished my collection restock after my last 2 purges and gave em a good work-through. Keep in mind I am limited to bedroom volumes. Amps are a pair of JCM900 high gain dual reverb combo amps. one is EL34 the other is 5581. Due to volume limits I end up having to run a notch or two hotter on everything than playing at real volumes. Main guitars are currently a PRS SE w/ a Crunch Lab at the bridge and PAF Joe at the neck and a Gibson SG Standard w/ 498T/490R setup.

1. Mild Overdrive. This is more of a booster/edge/light crunch and not really looking for much from it.
Out of contention:
OD-1. After I sold my last 3 these seem to have gotten prohibitively expensive to get another and seeing as I'm seeking one that doesn't have a JRC4558DD op amp, it wasn't worth it to me to drop the $ on one.
BD-2. This pretty much pushes to max fizz sound with the pickups in my guitars and sounds pretty poop-tacular.
OD-2 Standard mode. Doesn't have enough of a boost feel and has a bit more gain than I want from this role.
OD-2R Standard mode. See OD-2 Standard mode minus some warmth and articulation.
SD-2 Crunch mode. One word: Ugh.
OS-2. Too much gain for this role unless I pull the color knob to the OD side and back the gain way down... in which case it sounds like a thinner SD-1.

Runner up: OD-3. I've never loved this pedal. I've never hated this pedal. When I have it on my board I barely use it except to boost other pedals. Adequate but not optimal. Just not edgy enough.... feels a bit muted where I want there to be some oomph.

Current choice: SD-1 Black Label ACA Taiwan. This pedal has a bit more edge crunch and compression than every SD-1's I've ever owned (I've had ~35) but it's still nice and full sounding on chords. I'm not married to this pedal here but in the absence of a JRC4558D or similar OD-1 it's probably going to stay.

2. Mid-gain. This is pretty much standard rock gain levels ranging from heavy overdrive to crunchy saturated distortion.
Out of contention:
DS-1 MIJ/ACA MIT. Love the tone. Hate that it ruins every other distortion pedal in the chain. Moved it to a BCB-3 with a tuner and chorus.
DS-2. Didn't feel like going through the trouble of tracking down a germanium MIJ. Didn't love what I heard of MIT silicon diode versions. Didn't end up buying another one.
DF-2. Didn't buy one as I don't plan to use the feedbacker part which is what causes them to be pricier than they would be otherwise.
HM-2. I can't quite tweak this to fill this role. If I push the EQ to make it crunch hard enough it isn't warm or articulate enough. If I dial it back to a smoother sound it doesn't crunch enough.
OD-2 Turbo mode. Volume loss issues with my guitars.
MD-2. Can't tweak it for this role. Does better with more or less gain than this.

Runners up:
MZ-2. This is my most recent addition. It's so so so close to the OD-2R Turbo for what I'm asking it to do. Gain is dialed back below its "fizz" line.
OS-2. This fills this role really well, but the OD-2R has better articulation.

Current choice: OD-2R Turbo mode. Very solid crunch edge a la boosted plexi. Gain level is very similar to a DS-1. This is holding a VERY small margin over the MZ-2. Better sustain. A touch more compression but a little bit fuller sound spectrum. The MZ-2 has less noise and is a lot tighter sounding, which works well for some things but also makes it a little less versatile.

3. High gain. Over the top amounts of gain.
There are really only two analog pedals in contention here as they are the only ones that get the dynamic behavior I"m looking for at bedroom volumes. Basically I'm looking for crunch, gain, and sustain similar to a high gain tube amp pushing like 110db.
The HM-2, HM-3, MD-2, MZ-2 just can't quite do what I need them to do at that volume. At real volumes this would probably change quite a bit. Oddly enough, my OS-2 comes closer to filling this role than those other 4.

Runner up: MT-2. I have a tone dialed in that doesn't make me want to scream and cover my ears. I don't love it, but behaviorally it does what I ask of it.

Current choice: SD-2 Lead mode. This pretty much blows away everything else in its class IMO. Like an MT-2 minus the suck. Tons of compression, ultra crunchy, sustain for days. Its biggest weakness is it's got a lot of hiss (even more than my NS-2 can get rid of). Out of the 3 primary pedals I have chosen this is the one I am least likely to replace.

Keep in mind these aren't really my favorite pedals overall, just the ones best suited for the specialized roles I am putting them in. If I was optimizing for single coils I'm sure this would look very different.

zentropa

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Pepe** » 04 Nov 2015, 08:15

> *zentropa wrote:*
> *SD-2 Crunch mode. One word: Ugh.*

Actually I personally like that mode very much. Of course it produces a very harsh sound if you turn the tone knob over 11:00h, but around the 09:00h setting it sounds really neat in my opinion. Maybe it's the combination Fender Stratocaster -> SD-2 -> Marshall 50W tube amp that makes me like the Crunch mode, because I always wonder why it receives so much hate everywhere. And maybe I'm just dumb.

Pepe

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Gasgano** » 04 Nov 2015, 15:18

Those are tastes. They cannot be questioned. I am a passionate hater of a few pedals that some seem to put on a pedestal (MT-2 and DS-1 for instance). I also love pedals that are hated or disregarded (Like the DA-2, the CE-5 or the OS-2).

While taste cannot be questioned, it can still be discussed (and SHOULD be), because it can open us to things we haven't noticed yet or haven't revisited for a few years. I love the descriptions of the reasons WHY the current choice is made.

I play through Fender Jim Root Strat (EMG Active Pickups) > Pedalboard > Fender Frontman 25 or 100W. So yeah, nothing vintage, nothing sound purists will like. But I get through. And when my musician friends hear my guitar they always wonder how I can sound so "big" with a strat, because you'd expect the classic single-coil sound. Quite an unusual setup, but then again, Yngwie Malmsteen plays with singles and sounds heavy.

Oddly enough, I also have 3 dirt boxes for the same roles (and I expect many more to have that trio of roles setup on their board)

Mild Overdrive: OS-2
I still have that one because I purchased it back when I needed it to fill the "mid gain" role too, since I only had 2 dirt boxes at the time. Kept it since. Then again, I tend to play with a fair amount of gain so my trio is probably higher on the gain scale than zentropa's.

Mid-Gain: DA-2 (OH REALLY?!)
Love at first try. Works perfectly with my active pickups at any volume, really. Bedroom, practice or concert, it always delivers. If I had only one dirt box, it would be the DA-2.

High Gain: ML-2
Yeah, I love the fact it can sound like a ton of bricks with active pickups for heavy and low riffs or over-the-top lead licks. If you're playing actives, it's a hidden gem because it doesn,t sound nearly as noisy as with with passive humbuckers though (my brother is a drummer and just picked up the guitar. Uses the ML-2 because he loves the way mine sounds. I have to say I find it a little noisy with his setup). Never tried with single coils.

Please, people, keep this alive, I want to know which pedals you prefer!

Gasgano

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **zentropa** » 04 Nov 2015, 16:46

> *Actually I personally like that mode very much. Of course it produces a very harsh sound if you turn the tone knob over 11:00h, but around the 09:00h setting it sounds really neat in my opinion. Maybe it's the combination Fender Stratocaster -> SD-2 -> Marshall 50W tube amp that makes me like the Crunch mode, because I always wonder why it receives so much hate everywhere*

I've never opened mine up but it sounds like LED clipping diodes without any kind of padding (e.g. a silicon in series) to dull the harshness. Feeding it single coils would probably yield some form of "edge of break" type dynamics. Higher output pickups push the clippers into full break all the time so it ends up sounding very jagged and ice pickey. While I do like some "mechanical edge" (e.g. tubescreamer) type sound from that role, I'm just not a fan of the SD-2 in that spot. I will try dialing the tone that far back, 10-ish is where I was running it. I had 2 OD-1's that pulled off this role like I wanted and neither had the 4558DD.

> *I am a passionate hater of a few pedals that some seem to put on a pedestal (MT-2 and DS-1 for instance).*

I hated the DS-1 until I started playing older ACA ones. I've owned all 4 variants and I find the 3 later ones to sound pretty bad due to too much fizz and not enough body. The original 7-pin toshiba op amp versions are very organic and crunchy with a lot of articulation. They behave a lot like an OD with a layer of sizzle. If you do some digging you can probably find a black label taiwan ACA in the realm of $20-25. They won't sound quite as good as an MIJ but are less than half the price and will do enough to provide that "ok, now I see why people liked these" answer. If you've only played PSA taiwan versions it's hard to see why vai, satriani, etc. used them.

I recently had this conversation with someone I know and if my understanding of how distortion works is correct, I have a pretty strong idea on your preferences Gasgano. The pedals you listed all fully saturate the signal and provide the attack dynamics on their own. I use this for my high gain role but my medium and low gain pedals are more of a blend in that I get about 80% of the saturation from my pedals and the other 20% from my amp. It's that combination that provides a different set of attack dynamics as it's more symbiotic in how full saturation is achieved. Boss only has a handful of pedals that will push the signal to full saturation (in a pleasing way) without the help of an amp and the majority of them are digital. Most players looking to do this have to run 2 pedals in series to get what a digital pedal will do with 1.

If you think of the 80's metal tone, this was more of a 50/50 split. Something like a tubescreamer providing 30-50% saturation and the other 50-70% coming from the amp (e.g. JCM800).

The rackmount ADA MP-1 is one of the best sounding analog overdrives that is able to fully saturate the signal. If memory serves (I haven't owned any of these since around 1997), the majority of the other pedals that I know will do this are USA era DOD pedals: e.g. Thrash Master, Metal Maniac, Super American Metal, and the original Grunge pedal (the one with butt, face, loud, etc. as controls). If you ever stumble one of these on the cheap (e.g. $20) might be worth giving it a whirl.

zentropa

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Dirk** » 04 Nov 2015, 17:43

One question: why don't you run the amp distortion by itself and turn down the volume with a power soak? Those 900's sound great, it seems like a waste of good sound to run a pedal into it, except for stacking an overdrive in front of it of course.

I know I'm pre-biased cause I generally find most distortion pedals "meh" compared to the real deal, but still it's worth considering.

Dirk

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **zentropa** » 04 Nov 2015, 20:31

> *One question: why don't you run the amp distortion by itself and turn down the volume with a power soak? Those 900's sound great, it seems like a waste of good sound to run a pedal into it, except for stacking an overdrive in front of it of course.*
>
> *I know I'm pre-biased cause I generally find most distortion pedals "meh" compared to the real deal, but still it's worth considering.*

Very legit question. If I was gigging live I wouldn't be using any dirt boxes except possibly something as a booster.

I mostly tinker nowadays and do things that I wouldn't do if I was an active performing musician. e.g. my 12 pedal board is ultimate tone suck and has about 8 pedals I would never use in a live setting. When I set it up I'm basically just looking to hit a few tones I'm keying on, usually trying to sound like something else. I definitely agree that my amp's drive channel sounds better than any pedal would, but I really only get 2 out of the 4 tones I'm using for tinkering (e.g. I can do clean or mild drive, med or high gain, but not all 4 with just the amp without significant tweaks).

I hang onto the amps in hope that someday I will live somewhere I can turn them up again

zentropa

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Mark123** » 04 Nov 2015, 20:41

I guess this is Boss only, right? I love Boss pedals but, i have never been fully content with their ODs and distortion pedals. Maybe because I prefer my amps set clean and dont't use amp distortion. The only Boss od/ds that I like very well is the ROD-10 half rack. Three great od modes plus full and warm distortion. 4-knob EQ makes it very versatile. Horrible fuzz mode, as mentioned above. But it not being a pedal makes things complicated.
Until last week I would have said: OD-1 or OD-2 for mild over drive, OD-2r for medium gain and SD-2 channel 2 for high gain. I do like the OD-3 as well, but I find it way too loud; have to keep level close to zero for unity volume. SD-1 would serve me well for low-gain purposes as well.
Started playing around with a couple of stacked OD-2r's recently and that's probably even better.
Still prefer my current Coolpedals DS >> Ibanez Mostortion >> Timmy however. Sometimes with the OD-2r in the chain because I like that one as well. And it sounds even better through the Timmy.
And then a load of Boss pedals of course.

Mark123

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Gasgano** » 04 Nov 2015, 20:47

> *zentropa wrote:*
> *Boss only has a handful of pedals that will push the signal to full saturation (in a pleasing way) without the help of an amp and the majority of them are digital.*

You've hit the spot right there. The key word: DIGITAL. Today's trend goes more towards analog vintage pedals. Since I play with EMG's, my signal is already "processed" and "artificial" going out of the guitars. Might as well get the most out of it and use the digital stuff that's going to color my tone. I mean, I absolutely never play clean, I always add a little chorus, HF-2 or reverb.

Your explanation does make sense and is in line with the fact wherever I play, in whatever practice room, I get the saturation levels I like independently of the amp it's plugged in, because I don't need the amp to contribute.

As for the DS-1, I can see how the recent MITs can tint my judgement though, as well as my active pickups: the initial signal going into the DS-1 is too weak (or "flattened", I don't know how to express that, I'm a French Canadian trying his best with Shakespeare's language) I believe, even with a brand new battery in the guitar.

Gasgano

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **zentropa** » 04 Nov 2015, 21:25

> *I guess this is Boss only, right?*

Yeah. Otherwise I'd be playing a Fulltone full drive 2, an 80's TS9, and a Russian big muff (although Laurie has had mine since ~2008... assuming he still has it).

> *As for the DS-1, I can see how the recent MITs can tint my judgement though, as well as my active pickups: the initial signal going into the DS-1 is too weak (or "flattened", I don't know how to express that, I'm a French Canadian trying his best with Shakespeare's language) I believe, even with a brand new battery in the guitar.*

All DS-1's seem to have issues if the guitar's signal impedance is very high or very low (active pickups are very low). I know part of the Keeley mod is done to help fix this.

I tend to have a variety of guitars with a mix of pickup configs, albeit all passive (I go active with Bass). HB guitars I generally go ceramic bridge w/ Alnico V neck or Alnico V bridge w/ Alnico II neck. I will coil split if they are PRS or Super Strats. Regular Strats I generally set up with either V/II/II, all V's, or all II's. Some pedals work really well with some setups and are pretty awful with others.

zentropa

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Gasgano** » 04 Nov 2015, 21:33

LOW IMPEDANCE.
This is what my "flattened" meant.

Gasgano

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **albumgatefold** » 11 Nov 2015, 03:16

Well lately I have fallen back into favor with my DF-2. I used one in the 80s but eventually I put it to rest in favor of SD-1 and a DOD supra distortion pedal. Then eventually just the SD-1.
Brought the DF-2 back out and man does it sound good: chunky tight and full. May be just me or my ears have changed but digging it.

albumgatefold

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **charmonder** » 11 Nov 2015, 04:41

I can support that DA-2 praise. I have the DA-2 as an add on of the GT-100, it is a noticeably hi-fi sound. for anyone that hasn't tried, I can briefly describe it as all the enhanced picking attack "edge" you expect from a distortion, yet retains an impeccable chord definition .

charmonder

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **Gasgano** » 11 Nov 2015, 22:04

That's a good description of the sound you can get from the DA-2. You get the "edge" without all the noise that usually comes with it.

Gasgano

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **fuzzbuzzfuzz** » 12 Nov 2015, 08:10

"Current choice: SD-1 Black Label ACA Taiwan. This pedal has a bit more edge crunch and compression than every SD-1's I've ever owned (I've had ~35) but it's still nice and full sounding on chords. I'm not married to this pedal here but in the absence of a JRC4558D or similar OD-1 it's probably going to stay."

Interesting. I balked at a mint JRC4558D OD-1 for about $150 two years back, sounded soooo good, if bright. I regret it now! On the other hand there are a few reasonably priced ACA SD-1s about, I may buy to compare and or mod a few. Any more info on differences with the MIJ or is it pedal per pedal variation?

fuzzbuzzfuzz

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **fuzzbuzzfuzz** » 12 Nov 2015, 08:13

I did Not know this!?

"DS-2. Didn't feel like going through the trouble of tracking down a germanium MIJ. Didn't love what I heard of MIT silicon diode versions. Didn't end up buying another one."

Differences?

Serial number crossover? Are all MIJs Germanium? mmmm what a magic sounding word!

fuzzbuzzfuzz

Re: Dirt Box Shootout

by **zentropa** » 12 Nov 2015, 17:48

Interesting. I balked at a mint JRC4558D OD-1 for about $150 two years back, sounded soooo good, if bright. I regret it now! On the other hand there are a few reasonably priced ACA SD-1s about, I may buy to compare and or mod a few. Any more info on differences with the MIJ or is it pedal per pedal variation?

Yeah, those 4558D OD-1's are bright and bitey, sort of like a fuller, less mechanical sounding tube screamer.
As for SD-1's I've only owned a couple but have played several. These were pretty similar to the dirt differences I posted at:
http://www.stompboxzone.com/forum/viewt ... f=3&t=3484

Seems like the similar eras will have more crunch, less crunch/compression with more bass, etc. With that long of a production run there will be a lot of variance. I do find the PSA MIT's to have a smaller (squished) sonic spectrum and sound a bit "dead" in comparison to anything I have played from the ACA era.

Differences?

Serial number crossover? Are all MIJs Germanium? mmmm what a magic sounding word!

I haven't played a silicon DS-2 to really give it an honest comparison but I can compare the Germanium ones to say a DS-1. The Ger DS-2's were much much much sludgier... sort of like a PSA era DS-1 with the low end of an HM-3. They weren't overly compressed but had a huge bottom end with a high end sizzle. Felt scooped in the upper mids but full in the low mids.
Tonally I thought they did this sort of sound:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jk_hjsPE6T0

Not sure when they stopped being Germanium, I just know mine were after checking them. I ended up selling the two I had to Nirvana fanatics.

zentropa