

ValveDrive Tube Overdrive/ Preamp Pedal & WahOne Wah/Volume Pedal

Published in: *Bass Player* May-2006 (US)

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Way back in March '01, I had a ball reviewing EBS's BassIQ envelope filter and its then-revamped line of "Black Label" bass pedals, so I had high expectations when the Swedish company sent its new ValveDrive tube overdrive pedal and WahOne bass wah. Like their siblings, these two effects are also priced for high expectations, so I set out to see whether the ValveDrive and WahOne have the burly build and sonic stuff to match that boutique price tag.



EBS WahOne

A wah pedal is a filter, a circuit that lets certain frequencies pass below a cutoff frequency that is accentuated by a resonant peak. Unlike an envelope filter, where dynamics control the cutoff frequency, the movement of the pedal itself controls a wah's cutoff. The EBS WahOne's pedal is made of thick chrome, and it moves a heavy plastic gear control that turns a potentiometer beneath the pedal. A black steel chassis, screwed-in rubber feet, and a no-slip footpad complete the WahOne's robust package. A footswitch under the pedal's toe toggles the unit on and off, but since the WahOne can also function as a volume pedal, I wished the footswitch swapped volume and wah functions. Instead, you have to bend down and mash a little plastic button to change modes.

The remaining little plastic buttons are where the WahOne gets sonically clever. Tube sim gives the wah tone a little grit—though it's a tad buzzy sounding—and rev opens the filter in reverse. This can lead to some interesting playing possibilities: Imagine what you would play if bo-wah happened when you lifted your toe and waa-ooop when you lowered it.

Rev can also make the WahOne work as a backward volume pedal, which could be perfect for fades. The next group of settings alters the wah's sound itself. The range knob sets the band of frequencies within which the wah filter moves, from a darker, bottom-end effect to one that plays primarily on your tone's top end. I used it to seek out sweet spots for different wah sounds. Low pass shears off most of the high frequencies. (For a huge, dark dub tone, engage low pass, and leave the pedal set back.) The hi-q resonant peak tweaker accentuates a frequency slice around the cutoff, making the effect totally wah-some, even with low pass engaged. All these controls give plenty of flexibility to get groovy wah sounds while preserving the fundamental as much as you need.

After a day or so, the first pedal I tried started performing intermittently. Sometimes the wah or volume function would cut out, or work only in reverse mode. Also, the battery-compartment cover latch broke off almost immediately after it arrived. EBS rushed us a second pedal that had no such problems.

EBS ValveDrive

Built like a murder weapon, the EBS ValveDrive's most distinctive visual feature is its chrome-encased 12AX7 tube. Powered up with the included ac adapter, the pedal emits an amber glow that comes from an orange bulb beneath the tube rather than the tube itself—kind of cheesy, but it does look fairly cool and it might keep bugs away at outdoor gigs. Like most pedals, the ValveDrive has a right-hand input, and the unit's five knobs are oriented in right-to-left signal-flow order. Still, since most amplifiers have left inputs, it feels odd to have gain on the right, volume on the left, and the three EQ knobs in what seems to be reverse order. The right-hand active footswitch turns the effect on or off, and a toggle on the rear panel sets whether turning off the effect results in a bypassed or muted signal. (Wouldn't it be great if more pedals had that?) In addition to working as an overdrive effect, the ValveDrive can serve as a tube preamp. I tried it out both on the front end of amps like an effect pedal, as well as going directly into a solid-state head's effect return, effectively building my own tube-solid-state hybrid rig, with built-in overdrive.

The ValveDrive specializes in the righteously nasty. Its signature sound is a bristling tube-like huff that ranges from a gruff and gravelly fuzz to a snarling roar, with the badness growing as you crank gain. The EQ filters, which are passive—"flat" is with bass and treble near minimum and middle at maximum—shape the sound subtly, but can help establish a solid low-end sound that won't get lost in the mix. "Vintage" says the label by the left footswitch; the otherwise helpful manual says that this switch toggles between a "vintage" sound and one that's "standard modern." A query to Sweden produced the explanation that the vintage circuit engages a negative feedback loop across the tube, with a pair of asymmetrical diodes wired in parallel—a common ingredient in solid-state distortion pedals. Here's what I found, playing-wise: Vintage mode delivers a big, woofy sound, with a muted top end and a fuzziness that extends down into the lower mids. "Standard modern" has clearer, more articulate low mids, leaving a saw-like, cutting high-end buzz



that pierces through atop a menacing bottom snarl. In other words, both sounds were rad, and playing with the gain control, the EQ, and your bass tone's treble content means the ValveDrive offers a veritable sonic smorgasbord, from the subtle and furry to the completely sick and riff-o-licious. I liked grooving it up with a bit of restrained fuzz, say, with the gain at 10 o'clock and vintage on, but I also liked riffing it down with some seriously huge crunch, say, with gain around 1 o'clock and vintage off. It is confusing that the vintage LED is yellow when it's on and red when it's off, while the active LED is red when it's on.

True tone tweakers might try a tube change with the ValveDrive. I swapped out the Svetlana 12AX7 for an Electro-Harmonix 12AX7. The difference was subtle, but the E-H produced slightly more subdued highs and creamier upper mids, while the Svetlana sounded a bit brighter and livelier.

I was plenty impressed with the way these pedals sounded. Both the ValveDrive and WahOne offer rich sonic sauce and a range of flavors worthy of boutique bucks. If EBS already had a reputation for making juicy bass effects, these two prove that it's well deserved. As long as the price tags don't make you blink twice, before passing these two by, think twice.

Overview

EBS ValveDrive

List \$399

Street \$320

Pros

Lots of thick and meaty overdrive sounds; flexible features

Cons

Mildly confusing switching

EBS WahOne

List \$299

Street \$240

Pros

Great bass wah with groovy options; doubles as a volume pedal

Cons

Switching between volume and wah functions isn't hands-free

Test gear

Soundroom Ernie Ball MusicMan StingRay, Carvin Icon 4-string, Lakland Darryl Jones Signature; Aguilar AG 500 with Aguilar GS 112 1x12 cabinet; Fender TBP-1 preamp with Crest CA 9 power amp and Bergantino HT 322 2x12 + 1x10 cabinet; Sadowsky SA-200 with Bergantino HT-322

