

HighBeam Research

## Title: Cool pedal alert: the Matchless Hot Box.(electric guitar foot pedal)(Evaluation)

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Solid-state distortion boxes far outnumber their tube-driven brethren, and Matchless has sought to narrow the gap with the Hot Box (\$399). If you're hip to Matchless amps, you'll appreciate what their first entry into the wacky stompbox biz has to offer. The Hot Box is a floor-mounted, two-channel tube preamp that packs a neat, point-to-point wired circuit and dual Sovtek 12AX7s within its heavy, chrome-plated steel chassis. In typical Matchless fashion, the guts are pure old-school hi-fi, with the carbon-composition resistors and custom-made polystyrene caps soldered directly to terminal strips and/or the U.S.-made pots, jacks, and footswitch. The wiring is bundled and tied in classic British fashion, the resistor and cap leads are insulated with Teflon shrink tubing, and strain-relieved shielded cabling is used in critical noise areas.

The Hot Box features an internal high-voltage power supply (wall-warts go home), and the unit powers up when plugged into an AC outlet. As on Matchless amps, the control panel and logo are backlit via a trio of internal incandescent lights.

The Hot Box is always active--when you plug in, your signal goes through a tube regardless of whether you've selected the overdrive mode. This is cool, though, because the tube buffering yields a slightly brighter and beefier sound compared to plugging straight into an amp. According to Matchless' literature, you can also use the Hot Box like an active direct box to go straight into a recording or PA mixer. The clean channel doesn't offer EQ, but there was enough gain on tap to easily blast our Fender test amps.

Pressing the Box's mechanical footswitch silently switches the unit to its high-gain channel. No channel-status indication is provided, so you have to audibly pay attention to what mode you're in--let's hope this oversight is corrected soon! Channel 2 features gain, bass, treble, and output-level knobs. These passive controls are extremely effective, very interactive, and darn reminiscent of those found on the Matchless Lightning amp. The range of tone colors must be heard to be believed! At full bore, the Hot Box delivers mondo sustain with just a touch of treble boost, but the wide-ranging gain knob allows subtle distortion if desired. Channel 2 is also very dynamic, so even if you're soloing in a sustained-out mode, the circuit will clean up nicely by simply backing off your guitar volume.

The Hot Box packs a highly satisfying variety of smooth tube textures. its bone-simple controls make it a snap to dial in tight, crisp overdrive, round, buttery blues/rock sustain, or intense, scooped-mid "grunge" growl. At \$400, the Matchless may seem pricey, but you'd pay about the same for an old Fuzz Face or Ibanez TS-808. The Hot Box is definitely the Rolls-Royce of pedals, and as with other Matchless products, you get what you pay for.

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