

# Vox Cooltron Brit Boost, Big Ben Overdrive & Bulldog Distortion

£149, £139 & £149

Vox turns its hand to a mini-range of boutique style stompboxes that combine valves and batteries by *Adrian Clark*



PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON LEE

Having impressed us with the Valvetronix range (including the Tonelab modellers) Vox has already turned its attention to another crafty application for low voltage valve use. While the Valvetronix range combined preamp valves with digital modelling, the Cooltron pedals use the valves (12AU7, to be precise) with analogue circuitry.

In true Jennifer Aniston style, here's the science bit. Normally, using valves at low voltage (known as 'starvation') causes problems due to unsatisfactory biasing and excessive power consumption, which isn't much use for a stompbox. As a solution, Vox has used two types of circuitry. To take care of biasing, a 'servo' circuit is used similar to the circuitry in high-end valve hi-fi amplifiers. This now means that the power supply can provide a low voltage and low current supply, but the valve will function exactly as it would do with a higher voltage. The upshot of this grossly simplified explanation is that the Cooltron pedals can run a valve circuit from a battery supply.

All three Cooltron pedals have the same general specifications: sturdy steel casings, mono input and output, power via four AA batteries (supplied) or a 9V DC adaptor (not supplied). They are also each a variation on the general overdrive/distortion theme, but they have very different sounds.

### Brit Boost

With the standard volume, gain and tone controls, the Brit Boost can be used as a standard overdrive/boost pedal. However, the second footswitch toggles the boost between the treble frequencies or the full frequency range.

**SOUNDS:** In full range boost mode, the Brit Boost does a good job of adding hair to your basic amp sound. The tone control is sensibly voiced, avoiding any unusable extremes, so there's plenty to work with. At the lowest tone settings, it's possible to get a good thick overdrive sound out of even the scratchiest single-coil bridge pickup, while the brighter settings can add plenty of bite to muddy humbucker sounds. As this is a boost pedal, the amount of distortion will depend on your amp and how you set it up, but there's enough of a kick to enable you to set up two quite different sounds, either clean/crunch or crunch/lead.

Unsurprisingly, the more EQ-specific treble boost mode gives less overall output, so you won't get quite such a dramatic effect. However, it does a good job of focusing the guitar sound on the upper mid-range area; perfect for making your single-note lines cut through. It's not the same as the classic sixties treble boosters, in that it doesn't create quite the same singing mid-

BRIT BOOST	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** A well-tuned range of tones
- **WE DISLIKED** It'd be nice to get a bit more boost in treble mode

range tone, but the Brit Boost does some great tones all the same.

### Big Ben Overdrive

With the same three controls, but only one footswitch, the Big Ben Overdrive covers some of the same applications as the Brit Boost. By keeping the gain low, you can use high volume settings to add a clean boost to your amp sound, but the Big Ben will also do a good range of smooth overdrive tones.

**SOUNDS:** The Big Ben doesn't seem to have quite so much boost potential as the Brit Boost, but there isn't much in it. It also has a narrower range of sounds available, but it does an excellent warm blues-style overdrive. Of course, if you already have enough gain from your amp, you could use the Big Ben to create a big, rich lead sound. The pedal has a more naturally bass-heavy sound than the Brit Boost; we found we had to lower the bass on the amp to tighten up neck pickup sounds. However, the Big Ben's tone control operates over quite a wide range, so there's plenty of scope for biting treble if you need it.

### Bulldog Distortion

Here's the dirtiest of the three; with an impressive range of knobs and two footswitches, it's also the most flexible. The Bulldog is a two-channel distortion pedal, and the two channels have different tonal characteristics. Each has independent gain and volume controls, and there are master treble and bass controls. The 'Gain 2 Voice' control is designed to fine-tune the mid-range characteristics of the second channel, moving from a sweet mid-range boost to a slightly 'scooped' cut. One footswitch turns the pedal on and off, while the other selects the channel.

**SOUNDS:** Channel 1 has the more traditional sound, a recognisably 'vintage' blues/rock tone. There's a lot more gain available here than on either of the other pedals, so you can quite easily go from a totally clean amp sound to a pretty meaty lead sound. The tone controls are more subtle on this pedal, so don't expect any radical EQ shaping; as with the Brit Boost, though, the advantage is that you're only dealing with sensible, useable frequencies. At full boost, the pedal has a nicely compressed, spongy fuzz sound... low voltage amp sag!



**They're certainly not the first pedals to use low voltage valves, but the battery operation adds extra convenience**

BIG BEN OVERDRIVE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Good vintage-flavoured overdrive
- **WE DISLIKED** Quite low output compared to the other two models

Moving to Channel 2 gives a more modern (Marshall, as opposed to Fender or Vox) distortion sound. By adjusting the voice control to taste, you can set up the pedal to give a couple of distinctively different distortion sounds. At the anti-clockwise extreme, the mid-range frequencies are fully

**VOX COOLTRON RANGE**

**PRICE:** Brit Boost £149, Big Ben Overdrive £139, Bulldog Distortion £149

**ORIGIN:** Japan

**TYPE:** Low voltage valve-powered pedals

**FEATURES:** Vox's Cooltron technology allows valves to be used at low voltages for overdrive sounds

**CONTROLS:** Gain, Volume, Tone (Big Ben, Brit Boost). Gain 1, Volume 1, Gain 2, Volume 2, Bass, Treble, Gain 2 Voice (Bulldog)

**CONNECTIONS:** In, out

**MIDI:** No

**POWER:** Four AA batteries (supplied) or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)

**OPTIONS:** None

**Korg UK**  
01908 857100  
www.voxamps.com

**The rivals**

Roger Mayer Concorde+	£135
HAO Rumble Mod	£150
Electro-Harmonix LPB-2UBE	£169

There are more than enough funky overdrive, distortion and boost pedals for you to be able to make a considered choice, so have a browse of your back issues! The Rumble Mod is a tonally versatile overdrive pedal that also does a clean boost. For simpler overdrive, HAO also does the cheaper Rust Driver. Roger Mayer's Concorde+ is a treble booster, which focuses the mid-range and gives your amp an extra kick. Finally, the E-H pedal uses a valve (but is mains-power only) to produce its distinctively smooth overdrive tone



→ boosted, and the sound is reminiscent of Clapton's Cream-era sound. There isn't much bottom end, but plenty of mid-range projection in a convincingly Marshall-esque fashion. Turning the voice knob clockwise gradually cuts out the mid-range. Again the control covers a sensible range... the most extreme setting being somewhat like the sound of a scooped JCM800.

**Verdict**

Cooltron might be a new and untried range, but these three pedals have a confident feel about them. Considering they're only (enhanced) single-function stompboxes, the prices are quite high, but then the technology is very new. They're not the first pedals to use low voltage valves, but the battery operation adds extra convenience. If your taste in guitar tones tends towards the 'vintage' flavours, and you like the sound of thick, meaty, valve-powered mid-range frequencies, then there's a fair chance you'll like all three. **G**

**Considering they're only (enhanced) single-function stompboxes, the prices of these pedals are quite high, but then the technology is very new**

BULLDOG DISTORTION	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Tonally very versatile and difficult to get a bad sound
- **WE DISLIKED** Nothing, although a treble boost option would be the icing on the cake!

**Vox Cooltron Brit Boost**

**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★

**Vox Cooltron Big Ben Overdrive**

**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★

**Vox Cooltron Bulldog Distortion**

**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★



Nice one Vox: valve power (from a 12AU7) in a battery powered stompbox