



## Effectrode SR-71 Blackbird Overdrive Pedal **£349**

Valve-pedal wizard Effectrode adds a new model – could the SR-71 Blackbird be the last overdrive pedal you'll ever need? **by Nick Guppy**

**T**here are many overdrive pedals out there that claim to sound like real valves, and with modern technology, the distinction between solid-state and vacuum tube is more blurred than ever. However, for some players and designers, nothing sounds like a valve except a valve, and Effectrode's enviable line of clever and beautifully made pedals has raised the bar for what can be done in a compact package using real valves. Some Effectrode pedals have sub-miniature valves mounted internally, but for his latest creation, designer Phil Taylor has returned to the

universal ECC83/12AX7 dual-triode and created a drive pedal that uses not one or two, but three of them for a huge range of clean and overdrive sounds. Named after the legendary Lockheed surveillance aircraft, this issue, we're looking at Effectrode's SR-71 Blackbird Overdrive pedal.

The Blackbird has a slim alloy box, with a powder-coated finish, and screen-printed lettering that's neat, clean and functional. There's a separate power supply that delivers 12 volts DC, stepped up internally to a respectable 300 volts to get the valves working properly. Like all Effectrode products, it's

built to exceptionally high standards. The three JJ ECC83 valves are protected by a pair of solid, chrome-plated rails and sit in porcelain sockets, hand-soldered to a heavy-duty printed circuit board with gold-plated tracks that takes up the whole of the pedal's inside space. The PCB is stuffed with surface-mount and sub-miniature precision components that would look more at home in an esoteric piece of hi-fi equipment rather than a humble effects pedal. Omeg pots (which can be upgraded to horrendously expensive Vishay mil-spec types) feature alongside Carling

switches, which click and clunk in a reassuringly expensive manner. The attention to detail is almost pathological, with DC preamp heaters and a hi-fi-style ground-plane board layout, to keep unwanted noise down to an absolute minimum.

The Blackbird is a dual-channel preamp, with two sets of volume and tone controls and a gain control on the overdrive channel. There are two top-mounted footswitches: one for changing channels, and the other to bypass the Blackbird's circuit. A nice touch is that the footswitches don't directly channel the audio – the real switching is done by relays with gold-plated contacts, and is practically silent.

On the rear panel, there are standard jack sockets for guitar in/amp out, and a speaker-compensated recording output that can also directly power most headphones. There are





Stealthy controls are backed up by faultless build quality and attention to detail

three small toggle switches. One switches the overdrive channel between Classic (medium gain) and Creamy (high gain) modes, while the second changes the speaker compensation to approximate the feel of open or closed back cabinets. The third switch changes the bias of V1 to allow the use of ECC81s or 6072s for a less gained-out response. The overdrive channel's gain control is partially covered by one of the valve protection rails, making it a little fiddly to use, but apart from that, the Blackbird will stand up to years of professional use.

## Sounds

The Blackbird powers up with practically zero unwanted noise. We tried it into a variety of mixing desks and amps, including some coveted vintage and modern boutique models. The SR-71's clean channel is very clean, with perhaps a shade too much headroom for some guitars – it sounds great with a Les Paul, but using a Strat fitted with regular-output pickups made us think it could do with perhaps a touch more gain to round off the attack. Even so, this channel's effect on our Strat is quite spectacular, extending the frequency response with a tight and focused low-end, warm midrange and glassy highs, very reminiscent of the 'blackface'-era Fenders from which this pedal takes most of its sonic inspiration. A touch of analogue chorus produces a lush rhythm tone that sits perfectly in a jazz-fusion backing track. With no gain control on the Blackbird's clean channel, presetting the level to suit most guitars is always a

tricky thing to guess, and on balance, we think Effectrode has it more or less right.

The Blackbird's split-personality lead channel has two very different modes that provide a wide range of colour, from mild, almost clean midrange bloom, to fully saturated distortion. The classic setting used with our stock Les Paul Standard delivers a very satisfying sweet overdrive tone, and a soft-edged distortion that's very touch-sensitive. It responds superbly to pick attack, with a distinctive bite. Sitting in the strong midrange overdrive category of tones – but possessing its own character – this voice is typical of the sounds that players such as Larry Carlton, John Mayer and Robben Ford have used to such great effect.

Flipping the character switch up to the Creamy mode unleashes a boatload of extra gain, for sizzling sustain and blistering attack. Again, the Blackbird has its own thing going on here, but sounds reminiscent of a good 1980s Soldano or Bogner, with excellent string definition and practically no background noise, making it an excellent choice for recording.

That brings us neatly to the speaker-simulated output, which is apparently tuned to sound like a Jensen C12N, and features a switch that approximates open- or closed-back response. It does a good job of direct-to-desk recording, although all who heard it at *Guitarist* commented that more treble and presence wouldn't go amiss. That said, plenty of people moan about the overly harsh or unnatural sound that emanates from many non-

## The Rivals

**Custom Tones' Ethos** sells direct for \$399 plus shipping and import duty – it's a straight-up solid-state replica of a Dumble ODS, with a near-fanatical following in the USA and Japan, and a waiting list of around a year. **Blackstar's HT Dual** costs around £169 – it has one valve, two channels and a lot of sonic flexibility inside. **Denis Cornell's Overdrive Special** is another dual-channel valve pedal that can hold its own with the biggest and best, it sells for around £199

digital direct outs, and this certainly does not suffer that.

## Verdict

Effectrode's Blackbird is a breath of good old fashioned valve fresh air when it comes to modern preamps and pedals. We are truly impressed with the uncompromising approach to design and build standards, and the studio-quality output. It's certainly not cheap, but neither is it expensive when you look at what's in it – the SR-71 easily has the quality of tone and build to justify its price. It may be overkill if you already have a modern multi-channel amplifier, but plugged into a simpler non-master volume, vintage-style amp, the SR-71 comes into its own. It's a real boon for recording, too, even though we'd like more treble and presence from the speaker simulated output.

In a market awash with high-end boutique pedals, it can be hard to offer something truly unique and compelling. Effectrode has done that very successfully here. **G**

## The Bottom Line

**We like:** Built like a tank; super-versatile, with a wide range of tones

**We dislike:** Overdrive gain control awkward to access; speaker sim'd out needs more treble and presence

**Guitarist says:** A thoroughly impressive valve overdrive



## Effectrode SR-71 Blackbird Overdrive Pedal

**PRICE:** £349

**ORIGIN:** UK

**TYPE:** All-valve overdrive pedal with true bypass

**VALVES:** 3x ECC83/12AX7

**CONNECTIONS:** Mono standard-jack input and output, speaker-emulated recording out

**CONTROLS:** Overdrive channel: volume, bass, mid, treble and gain. Clean channel: volume, bass mid and treble. Toggle switches for drive-type select, cabinet sim select and V1 bias select

**FOOTSWITCHES:** Channel select and bypass

**INDICATOR:** Pedal on LED, Channel LEDs

**POWER:** Regulated 12V DC external supply (included)

**DIMENSIONS:** 120 (d) x 190 (w) 32mm (h)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1/ 2.2

**OPTIONS:** There's a bass mod that doubles the values of the polyester coupling caps for extended low-frequency response. The caps in the tone stack can also be altered for Fender, Marshall or customer-specified response. Both of these are included in the price. Effectrode is also looking at offering Vishay military-spec pots as an option (£TBC)

**RANGE OPTIONS:** None  
**Effectrode Audiophile Pedals**  
**01782 372210**

**www.effectrode.com**

## Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★