

Boutique Effects: The Extended Sonic Praxis of Pedal Design

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By  
Nicholas Demalderis

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The contemporary world of stompbox effects consists of essentially two overarching approaches to the business and craft of pedal design: mass producers who sell mostly functional effects that are geared towards conventional ideas of practical instrument timbre, and boutique builders who appeal to niche groups with tailored designs. That is not to say no overlap exists between these categories: boutique designers often engage with larger scale manufacturing and traditionally-voiced effects, and mass producers likewise will occasionally release more eccentric designs. Consequently, for the purpose of defining what makes a pedal company “boutique,” one must consider the underlying process of stompbox design. Compared to mass manufacturers, boutique pedal builders engage in a broader creative practice through an individualized creative process in pedal design, comprising circuitry, design, engineering, and the sonic arts. These pedal companies hone in on focused markets where there is an interest in eccentricity, vintage-spec reissues and reimaginations of classic designs, or any other opportunity in a musical niche to design what is not feasible for mass market. Interacting with niche markets, boutique builders are influenced by and duly influence creative praxis in music. By designing tools that inform the creative process, boutique pedal builders influence creative practices through the living materiality of their hand-made tech.

Regarding “makers,” of which boutique builders exist as a subset, Anderson envisions one possible future where “thousands of smaller firms picking off niche markets” overcome the “few big industrial giants.” He is idealistically describing the maker movement as potentiating innovation in the hands of the everyperson. The maker movement is one that doesn’t always seek to create a business or make money, but to be technologically self-sufficient, or to “free ourselves from big companies” (Anderson, Epilogue). While the boutique pedal economy is far

from a perfect fit to the maker model, the general ethos is consistent. Boutique builders seek to interact with and appeal to niches, as opposed to the “industrial giants” that create effects for mass market. In order to sell large quantities of pedals, mass manufacturers—Boss, MXR, TC Electronic, to name some—must create effects that suit the sonic palette of many musicians. There is no pretension here towards large-scale production or the resulting effects boxes, but it is important to acknowledge that pedal design at that scale is driven entirely by profit. Profit is inherently a populist motivator; creating effects pedals based on what will be popular means that industrial-scale effects companies are naturally going to attempt similar designs, and acceptable forms of innovation are bound by the success of previous designs.

A keen example of such homogenization of stompbox effects comes out of one of the most popular overdrives of all time, the Ibanez TS-808 Tube Screamer. Susumu Tamura aimed to design a pedal that was similar to the already successful Boss OD-1 and MXR Distortion+. In his words, it was akin to how “one record company commercializes a sound, and then other companies follow that trend” (Bolembach). Although the TS-808 was innovative in that its design was the first to use an operational amplifier to create distortion, rather than discrete transistor circuits, the project’s goal was to create a pedal that would play well with the greatest variety of guitars and amplifiers. The TS-808 was the solution to a problem of mass appeal. To contrast, the boutique ethos is to take design risks that instead result in more unique sounds. By defining and attempting to influence niche markets, boutique builders interact more directly with individuals’ processes, and the demands of that niche may in turn influence the pedal designers’ own ideas.

In the current discourse surrounding music, technology, and tech-driven music, it is a bit redundant to completely break down the ways in which music and technology are intertwined. At this point, it may be established as axiomatic that technology has an overwhelming influence on both timbral aesthetics and musical styles, as well as creative process (Byrne 104-105). Considering that timbre is a fundamental aspect of composition, the re-imagination of acoustic instruments with effects pedals implies that such effects are themselves an integral part of the same compositional process. As David Byrne points out, one result is that the tonal and textural qualities of processed instruments play a larger role in composition. Establishing the connection between signal-processing devices such as pedals and the resultant music is simple enough. To that extent, I seek to establish not that boutique effects technologies merely exert influence on music and process, but that these effects devices and the makers behind them are part of a greater continuum of creative practice and pedal design.

Boutique builders themselves exist on a gradient, though in this case often one of technical expertise. Regardless of how that expertise shapes the builder's own process, ideas, and designs, their practice is one of improvisation. By the merit and ethos of its practice, boutique design involves the cavalier aspect of asking, "what if?" The creative goal of a builder is to capture this beginning. Like musical improvisation, the process of designing an instrument effect still involves deliberate technical and aesthetic choices, but it also involves the manipulation of materials and structures in ways that can result in unplanned outcomes (Fenn 67). The improvisational practice itself involves an awareness of "the inevitable situatedness of an improviser in a work" (Peters 3); implying that, in part, the improviser's own personal proximity to and entrenchment in various communities—artistic, musical, or otherwise—is

channeled through their improvisational work. The “work,” or pedal in this case, may be conceived of as an end. Truthfully, it is a part of the overall improvisational process that extends beyond the so-called complete and bleeds into musical process through utilization. Where improvisation may be thought of as a preservation of the “beginning” of a work, Peters points out that this is the manner in which improvisation is “secreted beneath the immaculate surfaces of finished works” (3). The continuum of improvisation between boutique builders and improvisors as described by Fenn may therefore also span between boutique builders and creators of fixed works as an extended sonic praxis.

Fenn’s continuum of improvisation opens the door to examine how effects processing devices influences artists in the context of their practice. Whether pedals are manipulated in real-time during performance, or used to create complex timbres that inspire new approaches, effects regularly and directly inform artists’ aural choices. Davis describes the material exploration of effects as manifesting in several ways that center around subverting the intended design and configuration of instruments and effects—musicians “recruiting the complexities inherent within physical, technological materials” as part of their process (Davis 14-15). That is not to say that this subversion is only exercised on boutique pedals; the Boss DD-6 delay’s momentary looping function is often manipulated to create a glitched stuttering effect that, while requiring no modification, was likely not a goal of the original design (Reverb, Sept. 2015).

In the world of boutique builders, material subversion not only inspires their own designs, but can initiate a creative loop in pedal design between musician and designer. As part of the original wave of boutique builders, Zachary Vex of Z.Vex Effects invented the Fuzz Factory in the mid-90s, stemming from the grunge and indie rock obsession with 60s and 70s

fuzz tones, taken to a new extreme. Many of the principles of Vex's Fuzz Factory set a paradigm for boutique builders: the effect expands on the classic 60s fuzz by adding parameters to adjust transistor bias and starve supply voltage to active components. Vex eventually released a "probe" version of the pedal allows the device's self-oscillation to be played similar to a theremin, likely influenced by the way users were manipulating the pedal to tune its oscillating feedback. As informed by Fenn's ideas on pedals and improvisation, when examining effects such as the Fuzz Factory the continuum of practice emerges more so as a result of immersion in cultural communities than a direct influence between user and builder.

That is, effects technology has as much an intersubjective social and cultural context as the music itself; a boutique builder's idea of what a stompbox effect should look or sound like is informed by communal participation in pedal design, through online communities and more organically through the relationship between builders and musical artists. Oliver Ackerman's Death By Audio effects are also an apt example of the interplay between community and pedal design, especially when one takes into account both the context of the company and the music created by Ackerman, of A Place to Bury Strangers. The Death By Audio space was not only a place for Ackerman to build and design pedals, but also record music and put on shows. The fuzz-demolished aesthetic of Ackerman's band as well as his contemporaries—like Ty Segall—are ever-prevalent in Death By Audio's pedal designs, to an extent where many of their pedals only fit comfortably in the context of the loud, abrasive, and noisy DIY music communities that Ackerman called home.

The reality of any music technology is that its users are inevitably embroiled in the context of its moment. The manner in which that technology informs process may rise out of

limitations, such as the case with nascent recording tech, or it may rise out of a cultural or aesthetic ethos, which is central to contemporary effects processing. The bridge that is gapped between artist and pedal builder is especially notable when the nexus effect technology is an individual's concentrated effort to imprint themselves and their aesthetic experiences on a circuit. Through this individualized practice, boutique builders embed complexities within their hand-made tech that extends to users as an expanded practice. Their immersion in creative communities translates more directly to their designs, and in turn these choices inform the processes of the musicians and sonic artists that utilize these effects.

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