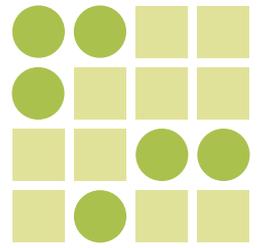


TRENDS



GEAR TREND | BY DAN DALEY

THE STOMP OF APPROVAL

The Sultan of Bahrain is famous for shelling out millions of dollars to host super-intimate concert events for members of his immediate family. That's one way of getting great artists into your house. But for the rest of us who've had to make do with buying the CD, there's another way.

The last three years have seen a proliferation of star-studded stomp boxes: effects pedals that go beyond simply being branded with a guitarist's image and likeness. Instead, they seek to recreate the essence of a musician's tonal signature — their sonic DNA, so to speak.

Guitarists can now buy pedals that offer not just the basic

components of the sounds of icons like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Anthrax's Scott Ian, Queen's Brian May or Darrell "Dimebag" Abbott; these boxes offer those components configured as they were for specific songs, such as Hendrix's wah-wah on "Little Wing," or the rotating speaker sound that heralds Clapton's "Badge." To rephrase the old FTD slogan, a Hendrix pedal is the next best thing to being him.

A GROWING CATEGORY

The market is getting crowded.

Since 2003, DigiTech has brought out numerous pedal products, including the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Eric Clapton Crossroads, Dan Donegan Weapon and Scott

Ian's Black-13, and it has other personalized pedals in the pipeline, such as a Brian May pedal. Dunlop Manufacturing, which makes the MXR brand, offers a Dimebag signature pedal, the Zakk Wylde Overdrive and its own Hendrix signature wah-wah.

New Jersey-based Tech 21 touts a pedal authorized by Randy Bachman, guitarist for Canadian '60s hitmakers the Guess Who and the "B" in BTO (Bachman/Turner Overdrive).

The creators of these pedals agree that they are a logical extension of a far older trend, one that affixes the names of famous musicians to gear.

"The market for [personalized] guitars and amplifiers was saturated," said Dale

Krevens, vice president of Tech 21, which brought out its American Woman pedal (named for one of the Guess Who's biggest hits) in 2003. "But the demand for endorsed products has always been there. So it was a matter of, where do you take it next?"

Tech 21 had included a preset called "American Woman" on the rackmount version of its signature SansAmp pre-amp product. According to Krevens, Randy Bachman heard it and approached the company at a NAMM show. "He loved the way it sounded and wanted a pedal version of it," she said.

Around the same time, DigiTech launched its Dan Donegan Weapon pedal, aimed at the niche that the raunchy-

sounding Disturbed guitarist epitomized. That product did well, according to DigiTech Guitar Marketing Manager David Rohrer. But more importantly, it became the calling card used to approach Clapton's management and the estate of Jimi Hendrix.

"Having the Donegan Weapon out in the marketplace enabled us to go to other artists and show that this was a viable concept," he said.

FINDING THE MODEL SOUND

The process of recreating a guitarist's signature sound is complex, and pains are taken to both assure that the product's sonic authenticity satisfies the artist and serves as a marketing tool at retail.

DigiTech particularly emphasizes the lengths it went to make its pedal products authentic. The core is a procedure trademarked as Production Modelling. "It's the secret sauce," Rohrer quipped. More precisely, the process collects as many original and fundamental sound elements as possible — isolating guitar tracks on a multi-track recording, original amplifiers and guitars and pickups and so on — and subjects them to an algorithmic analysis.

Rohrer referred to the process as the "third level" of emulation. "As a player, you can collect all the individual components — the guitars, the amps — but that's not cost-effective, and you're still missing the final touches," he said. Those final touches come from a process of combining the algorithms that contain the basis of the sounds with A/B critical listening between them and final recordings.

In the case of the Hendrix pedal, DigiTech enlisted the help of Eddie Kramer, who was the first chief engineer at

Hendrix's Electric Ladyland Studios in New York in 1970 and who recorded and produced several Hendrix recordings.

"We went to the studio and accessed all the original tapes we could, and we went to Olympic Studios [in London, where Hendrix recorded his first album] and accessed as much recording gear as we could — the original tape decks and outboard equipment, like the compressors and the EMT [reverberation] plate," Rohrer said. "The only thing we couldn't get was the original rotary speaker Hendrix used for 'Little Wing' (one of the presets on the pedal). So we had one made to the original specs and miked and modeled that."

Rohrer said the pursuit of authenticity extended to Kramer pressing his thumb down on the flange of the tape spool as it played, which was the genesis of the "flanging" effect used on so many recordings in the 1960s and '70s. "It was so real that it was eerie," he said of the result.

The Crossroads pedal used similar elements, guided by Clapton's long-time guitar tech Lee Dickson and front-of-house mixer Robert Collins.

Tech 21's American Woman pedal came about very differently. Andrew Barta, company president, emulated Bachman's setup — based around a cascading gain structure — using solid-state FET components.

"I find this more useful than modeling, which is basically sampling a sound," he said. "You can simulate any amplifier by studying its schematic and transferring that to the solid-state domain. And that enabled me to keep it completely analog, which sounds better to me."

Licensing for the pedal products is still a wide-open field. None of the manufacturers would disclose precise terms

between them and the artists, but there are three basic formulas: a percentage of total sales revenues, a fixed royalty based on unit sales and a flat-fee buy-



The star-stamped stomp boxes offer a way to differentiate product in a very crowded market sector

out, or some combination of those. For the Clapton pedal, the artist's compensation includes a percentage of unit sales revenues donated to Clapton's personal charity, the Crossroads Centre in Antigua.

The process does not end with the final product. The chain of approval can be lengthy, including attorneys, managers, heirs and, of course, the artists themselves. "If anything discourages us from doing another pedal, it's that process," Krevens said.

SELLING PERSONALITY

But it's potentially worth it. According to NAMM's statistics, unit sales of stomp boxes have increased nearly 90 percent in the last decade and are expected to hit the 1 million mark this year. They're also driving a 72-plus-percent increase in

the sales of signal processing in general, despite the fact that sales of rack-mounted processors have slowed.

For retailers, the star-stamped stomp boxes offer a way to differentiate product in a very crowded market sector, as well as new sales avenues. In addition to musicians who want to actually use the boxes, they also appeal to collectors and aficionados of the artists. Rohrer said DigiTech took pains to make the Hendrix pedal's packaging and casing match the purple colors associated with the guitarist, enshrined in his anthem "Purple Haze."

They have also created dedicated POP displays, including life-sized cutouts of the artists and posters. The next step is an in-store demo station that lets consumers play with the boxes. It's a lot of effort, but Rohrer said the payoff comes not from just increased sales of these pedals. "They provide a 'halo' effect for the brand that extends through the rest of the effects lines and to other product categories," he said.

"Retailers like these products because they really sell themselves, based on the appeal of the artist," Krevens said.

In a celebrity-oriented world, this kind of product gives buyers a sense of getting closer to artists they admire and want to emulate. There are discussions about creating lines of pedals that capture the essence of a genre or an era — an '80s hair-band pedal is not a punch line, but a possibility. The biggest irony is that the boxes may, at times, come full circle, to be used by the artists themselves.

"Lee Dickson told me that a Leslie speaker cabinet can often break down," Rohrer said. "In the right setting, he could see Eric using the pedal to play 'Badge' onstage." **MI**