



V-STACK ATTACK!

3 Little Pedals A Whole Lotta Sound

-Brett Petrussek

I admit that I am somewhat skeptical when it comes to simulations and emulators. I realize there's definitely a place for tools that can reproduce the feel and sound of a real tube amp, but I'd been hard pressed to find something that felt and sounded convincing... that is, until I got my hands on this monstrous little trio from V-Stack by First Act.

Although the V-Stack series features a built-in speaker cabinet response simulator for direct recording, I wanted to push it into the realm of the true stomp box by using it in front of a small, solid-state amp. In other words, I wanted to see if I could find true valve-stack simulation. You know, take an affordable solid-state combo, dial in a flat tone, shove these things in front of it and see if I could turn the thing into a warm, responsive tube stack or hardwired amp. I was doubtful at first, but I quickly became a believer.

For my test I used a 68' Les Paul Goldtop loaded with humbuckers, a vintage BC Rich Mockingbird in koa for a wide range of pickup manipulations, and a Kustom Quad 65 combo.

I started out with the BHM (designed to nail the Brian May tone), running it through the clean channel of the Kustom. I found all the controls to be usable and active (meaning sensitive). I was truly impressed with the variety of sounds I was able to get with just one pedal. Since there was plenty of headroom with the Master Level control, in a matter of seconds I had my little combo pushing some serious air. It really felt like a big amp! The Cut control on the BHM allows for a

nice range of feel, from compressed to open. It served nicely as a brilliance or darkness control, and the results were immediately audible. I experimented with the Drive control, and this is where the pedal really shined. The Brian May tone was definitely there, so I was able to achieve singing lead tones that had a strong "vocal" quality, with plenty of midrange and sustain. The BHM doesn't affect or scoop the midrange EQ parameters on the amp, which is a plus.

The Tweedy member of the V-Stack series was equally impressive. And through it's based on the same premise, like the other pedals it has its own kind of voicing. Having said that, the Tweedy does what the name implies. I went for a single-coil sound with the Drive backed down a bit, and it was remarkably Fender-like. Then, with the drive cranked up, it got a lot more aggressive.

The Classic pedal has the same features as the other two, but it sounds more like a straight-up British stack. With the Drive control up high and Cut set for a bright tone, I was even able to get some gnarly late-70's Marshall tones.

The initial excitement I felt made me want to dig into the dynamic flexibility of the V-Stack pedals. The most significant quality I found in all three of them was the interplay between the guitar volume, the pedal and the amp. When the volume was backed down on my guitars, the pedals responded well. Tones remained clear and articulate, inviting the use of subtle nuances. This is the element that gives the V-Stacks their real tube-amp

feel. The end result is a range of dynamics that's nearly impossible to achieve in a solid-state environment.

I was a bit curious about the design approach with the V-Stacks, so I spent a few moments talking with designer/technician Steve Webster. Steve told me that the amp-simulation circuitry isn't based on conventional op-amp design techniques but instead employs a custom chip to implement specially designed amplifier stages that emulate the gain characteristics normally associated with specific types of tube amps. These emulation gain stages are able to produce a full set of odd-and even-order harmonics in a way that's directly analogous to harmonic production in a full-size tube amp, without any of the signal artifacts normally associated with gain stages based on op-amp design.

Basically, I'm never too concerned with technical specs. After all, it either sounds good and feels good or it doesn't. However the V-Stack trio was able to transform a small, solid-state combo into a much bigger sounding, more responsive tube-driven beast. These are cool pedals, for sure!

Item: V-Stack by First Act, Valve Stack Simulator Series, Tweedy BHM Classic
Retail Price: \$219-now comes with LED light and AC power
Review Results: Cool Pedals!

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