

The Black Label Society - EBS Black Label pedaler

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Despite 15 years of designing amps, cabs, effects and accessories, Sweden's EBS still doesn't command the level of brand recognition taken for granted by its more established gear-building competitors in the U.S. and Britain. But with introduction of its excellent Black Label effect pedal series, and high praise from marquee bass players like Marcus Miller, Victor Bailey, Stanley Clark(e) and Roger Glover, the Scandinavian stalwarts are about to change all that.

The Black Label series consists of six compact pedals that are slightly larger than vintage MXR boxes. The BasslQ, DynaVerb, MultiComp, MultiDrive, Octa-Bass, and UniChorus each boast an incredible tone, extremely sturdy housing and indigenously simple controls, including two sturdy rubberized knobs, a three-way mode switch and a heavy-duty steel on/off footswitch. The UniChorus and the DynaVerb also feature stereo 1/4-inch outs. The optional EBS AD-9 power supply can provide juice as to as many as 20 pedals, and each pedal can be powered by a nine-volt battery, which is accessible by removing the four screws on the back plate. EBS's own PL-10 and PL-20 1/4-inch straight connectors eliminate cable mess and make routing your signal through the whole Black Label posse a breeze.

There aren't a lot of stand-alone pedals out there made specifically to fulfill the basic sound set and expand the palette of discriminating bassists, and to do so with circuitry voiced for optimal bass response. The EBS Black Label pedals do a stellar job of filling that gap, especially the mighty MultiComp and the badass BasslQ. All of these pedals deliver premium sound-shaping power and deserve a serious look and listen by bassists ready to take the next step toward strong, individualized tone.



BASSlQ

Fans of stanky funk 'a la Bootsy Collins and T.M. Stevens need no introduction to the bitchin' sounds of envelope filters, which effortlessly inject funky rubber-band swagger into bass lines. The analog BasslQ is a welcome entrant to the field. Toggling the mode switch on this snotty little guy lest you go from alien-with-an-attitude auto-wah settings (in Hi-Q mode) to classic filtering (in Up mode) to bizarre, treble-annihilating dynamic inversions (in Down mode). The threshold and attack knobs let you tailor each sound for everything from subtle nuance to over-the-top special-effect applications. If you want greater flexibility, remove the back plate and adjust the trim pot to add up to 100 percent of the original signal's high end. There's a dearth of true pro-quality envelope filter stomp boxes on the market, which makes the EBS BasslQ (and a pair of star-shaped sunglasses) your ticket to funky town.

DYNAVERB

Although reverb isn't a particularly popular effect among bassists (since it tends to require a good deal of aural space in the mix) it can add a magical dimension to the instrument when deftly applied. Although the EBS DynaVerb's interface - reverb and tone knobs and two switches to choose the type of reverb - is one of the simplest found on reverb pedals, this puppy packs serious juju. Boasting 24-bit converters eight stereo reverbs (three room, three plates and two halls) and the ability to operate in parallel mode (via two internal switches), the DynaVerb certainly sounds pristine. EBS also deserves kudos for the DynaVerb's flexible tone knob, which has a range from bright, squeaky-clean highs to warmer, more analoglike tones. The DynaVerb faces stiff competition from manufacturers of other high-spec units that boast more features and more competitive pricing, but very few reverb pedals on the market were designed and voiced with bassist in mind.

MULTICOMP

A good compressor can be a bassist's best friend. Compressor neophytes will wet themselves when they hear the tonal difference the MultiComp makes, and even veterans who brag about their original dbx 160A rack units will be awed at the punch and life the MC breathes into stale or so-so tone. The MultiComp is based on an entirely analog circuit that features comp/limit and gain knobs, as well as Normal/MB (multiband)/TubeSim mode switch. The MultiComp sounds fine in Normal mode, but it really shines in the MB and TubeSim modes. MB gives bass tones a gorgeous sheen and snap as well as a lived-in warmth, and for all-round flexibility, it will likely be your first choice; if you think your popping and snapping were riotous fun before, your thumb will be in utter ecstasy here. In TubeSim mode, the MultiComp can go from restrained drive to all-out crunch, which makes it one of the most versatile, professional and down-right cool pedals I've yet heard.

MULTIDRIVE

The MultiDrive is similar to the MultiComp in that two of its three modes - TubeSim and Standard - will thrill almost any player looking for a fuzzy edge, while flat mode may appeal to fewer players, perhaps those with experimental and low-fi tendencies. In standard mode, the MultiDrive's drive and volume knobs offer a well-defined, versatile overdrive that will please straight-ahead rockers and metal-smiths. Favor detonation over definition? Switch to TubeSim, where you'll find nostalgic warm fuzzies and enough cranium-vibrating tone to make you consider retiring your Big Muff. It even has an active/passive switch for varying pickup types and Class A circuitry modeled after classic preamp. Factor all this flexibility, butt-kicking tone and bass-centric attention to detail, and you've got a big winner in the MultiDrive.

UNICHORUS

Ready for more subtle tone-shaping? Chorus has long been an ally of electric jazz bassists who want to emulate an upright sound, and for melodic players who wish to add thickness to their lyrical lines and upper-fret passages. The stereo UniChorus ably handles those assignments and more, flaunting studio-grace chorus, flange and modulation effects via depth and rate knobs and its three-way mode switch. And though the UC was clearly designed and voiced with the bass in mind, it sounds equally good when you dial in swimming chorus, freaky flange or spacious stereo-field effects on any instrument. Like all Black label pedals, noise is minimal, fidelity is incredible and tasty bonus tones are bounteous on the UniChorus.

OCTABASS

You may not want to step on it willy-nilly, but when an earth-shaking, cavity-rattling lower octave is necessary, the analog OctaBass is octa-bad. The Normal knob varies the amount of direct signal introduced, while the Octave control sets the volume of the effected signal. High mode offers a synthesized tone good for upper-register playing (or treble-range instruments), while Mid thunders out a classic octave effect just for bassists. Low brings out subterranean harmonics that subwoofer-toting bass addicts will lust after. Best of all, the OctaBass's tracking is impeccable, allowing you to play two- and three-note chords with only the lowest note triggering an octave.

