



Roger Mayer

Voodoo-Vibe Jr, Concorde+ Treble Booster & Vision Octavia

SOUTH LONDON EFFECTS WIZARD ROGER MAYER is the stuff of rock legend – and now he’s updated three timeless classics for 2004. Dave Hunter stomps and savours...

Log into any guitar effects chat room and you’ll soon discover that the quest for ‘the Hendrix sound’ overrides the tone-detectives’ efforts to pin down the secrets of probably all other players combined. How were his Fuzz Faces selected? What were the exact mods made to his wah-wahs? How precisely was his Uni-Vibe tweaked? What went into his Octavia? One man knows the answer to all of the above: Roger Mayer. He probed and modified the lot of ‘em standing right beside Hendrix with his own smoking soldering iron, and personally designed and built the original Octavias, plus plenty more enigmatic effects, boosters and EQ stages for the studio sessions.

You could sit upon laurels like these for a lifetime. But Mayer is most at home with his R&D hat on, and he has never been happy to let past successes sit unexamined and unrevised. If a pedal can be improved – no matter how popular its current form – then he’s going to improve it. You could go so far as to say he considers it a betrayal of his calling

not to. So this is what we have before us today: three effects with their feet in classic rock tone of the ‘60s, made by the man who worked beside Jimi, but updated to be the best they can be for the year 2004.

All three pedals are housed in the new Roger Mayer ‘Vision Series’ enclosure, too – a trim, pedalboard-friendly and built-like-a-tank-tread box with the added bonus of *three* outs from each: Hard Wire Bypass, Buffered Out 1 and Buffered Out 2. These provisions should put pay to the buffer vs true-bypass debate forever. Just choose the output that sounds best to you, and if you want to run to two amps at once you can go from Buffer 1 and 2 with no signal loss. There’s also a clever sliding battery door on the forward edge, and a standard neg-tip barrel style DC input socket.

VOODOO-VIBE JR

After departing into the studio/pro-audio field throughout the 1970s, Mayer returned to guitar effects in the early 1980s. One of the

VOODOO-VIBE JR

CONCORDE+

OCTAVIA

mainstays of his new line-up was the Super-Vibe, a pedal built along the lines of the last Mayer-modded Uni-Vibe used by Jimi Hendrix. From this evolved the Voodoo Vibe, a unit with even further improvements and vastly broadened control parameters. It’s a monster of a ‘Vibe, and one of the most soulful sounding and successful of its type in pro circles; it’s expensive, too, and for some it can prove a pretty complex beast to use.

Mayer recently concluded that a lot of guitarists could survive happily without some of the more unwieldy features of the big V-V, and that a trimmed-down design could hit the market at a nicely trimmed-down price. The brainchild of all this is our Voodoo-Vibe Jr: a four-knob ‘Vibe with the same discrete transistorised, class A analog circuitry found at the heart of the original – including the magical little photoresistors responsible for the unit’s warm, organic four-stage phasing – at about £150 less than the big brother. What the Jr lacks won’t phase most users, either. There’s no tremolo function here, but that was a surplus feature anyway, and no external footcontroller for Speed – but few people really used that on the fly. Output level is now preset, and a Mix control replaces the switching between Vibrato and Chorus.

I was told that the Jr is designed so the new user can set its Sweep, Speed, Intensity and Mix controls to 12 o’clock and get the instant gratification of useable sounds. It’s very true – and in fact after days of fun fiddling and

playing, my favourite settings remained within a short twist of these positions (with the one exception usually being a Mix leaning more toward Chorus), though there's plenty more to be had elsewhere. Speed and Intensity work as they should, going from slower to faster than you'll probably need, and nothing to a very full-depth effect respectively. In fact, the pedal does a great soft, warm boost with Intensity set to minimum. Sweep dials in the desired centre frequency of the 'swoosh' and is most effective in Chorus.

But what matters in a 'Vibe more than any of the control functions is the inherent tone of the circuit, and this baby has got it heart and soul: it nails that lush, watery, slightly bubbly sound while retaining an impressive degree of the sound and dynamics of the guitar stuck into it, and introducing negligible noise into the brew. It all soon becomes very addictive, and I found it hard to resist keeping just a little bit of that warm gurgle running in everything I played. Set Speed high and Intensity fairly low for the subtle thickening that SRV and many other great bluesers used so well, or use a slower, deeper effect for hypnotic Hendrix or Robin Trower style riffs. Beautiful.

CONCORDE+

In its original form, a treble booster is a frequency-selective preamp whose usefulness has all but slipped by the wayside. Back in the day, when poor guitar cables and impedance-loading pedals were greatly sapping the treble content of the tone that travelled from guitar to amp, they offered one way to get that cut and crispy crunch back into a Marshall stack or Vox AC30. With today's modern hi-fi sounds and surplus of brightness, a treble booster would seem a one-way ticket to Tinnitus Town. But of course Roger Mayer is not one to let a design lie, and this is far more than the aural icpick that was its '60s predecessor.

The Concorde+ circuit comprises a germanium-transistor treble-booster (with an AC128 like the one which appeared in many early versions of the Fuzz Face) preceded by a low-noise silicon drive stage, with a tone-shaping stage between them. Governing all this are knobs labelled Drive, Tone and Output. To my mind, however, the Tone functions as more of a 'fat' control, thickening the body and adding low-end as you turn it up, for full-range rather than mere treble boost.

And the sound? Fat, juicy, muscular, nicely compressed and plenty ballsy, with an inherent sweetness at its centre. In one sense it's not entirely transparent, due to the thickness and sweetness it adds; but in another I find it retains more of my guitars' characters than probably any of the dozen or so overdrive pedals I have on hand. In fact, push the Drive and it accelerates from boost to over-overdrive, with some heavy amp-slamming if you want. It's definitely a pedal with its sweet spots, and you might need to play with it a while to find them (Drive at 11 o'clock, Tone at 3 and Output at 2 floats my boat), but when you get there it has dynamics and a more-ish tactility that are rare in an overdrive or booster. You can get some duff

FACTFILE



VOODOO-VIBE JR

Description: 'updated vintage' style chorus/vibrato effect in the Uni-Vibe mould

Features: controls for Speed, Intensity, Sweep, Mix; stompswitch for on/off; hardwired and buffered outputs

CONCORDE+

Description: hybrid germanium/silicon booster-cum-overdrive

Features: controls for Drive, Tone, Output; stompswitch for on/off; hardwired and buffered outputs

VISION OCTAVIA

Description: simulated octave-up effect with drive

Features: as per Concorde+

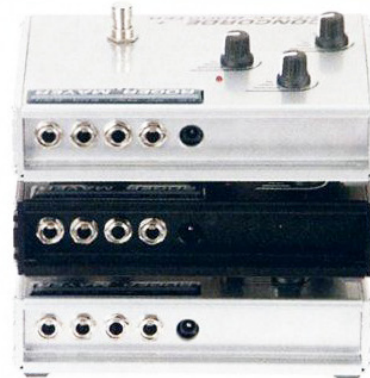


tranny-driven oversquashed sounds too, no doubt, but I'm sure some would find even those pretty cool.

VISION OCTAVIA

This is where it all began. Many people just don't 'get' octave pedals, while others are addicted to that funky, pinched, simulated octave-up sound. I was in the former camp until recently, but I found this Vision Octavia a lot of fun.

This unit apparently contains the feed-forward and gating effects added to the final Hendrix version of the Octavia but lacking from previous RM production models. The Tone control is an added bonus and really helps you nail the sound and response you're seeking, and the Drive lets you push the effect into a degree of self-distortion in front of the octave. It's still a one-note wonder, and requires accurate fretting to get the best



tracking results (a Strat's neck pickup with a little treble rolled off works best), but use it right and this one proves a little easier to tame than any I can remember playing in some time. The sound is all there, too: wild, edgy and whacked. A fine update.



VERDICT

These are great versions of some classic pedals, and each certainly takes an archetypal design soundly and roundly into the new Millennium. The Vision Octavia will appeal to fans of the octave effect, and should win over some new devotees too, but the Vibe Jr might well win the most fans of the bunch. It offers the tonal integrity of one of the best deluxe 'Vibe descendants out

there, with all the features the vast majority players will need anyway, for less cash and less fuss. I have a feeling some people might try the Concorde+ and not get what I'm on about, but after a couple weeks of fiddling I love it dearly. Give it some time, tweak a bit, and play your heart out. There's a lot of soul here... just as there is in all three of these new Roger Mayer units. Job well done.