

“I Just Leave Off All the Crap” Joe Gore On Stompbox Design

I've conducted literally thousands of musician interviews. Time to suck it up and suffer through one of those pretentious Joe Gore interview myself.

Joe: *Why, why, why would you want to sell stompboxes? Aren't there already enough clowns in the circus?*

Joe: Tell me about it! And believe me, I'm *far* from the most talented clown. I have no engineering background whatsoever, and my craft skills haven't evolved much since I got a C- in middle school wood shop. I started building pedals while doing digital modeling work for Apple and other companies, figuring that a few builds would help me better understand how they worked. But I got hooked and spent countless hours toiling at my workbench, usually while listening to audiobooks of long 19th-century novels. (If it weren't for pedal building, I'd never have “read” *Anna Karenina* or *Vanity Fair*.) I started with kits, then clones, and then began dicking around with the circuits. When the smoke had cleared and the smoke alarm had been reset, I had a few designs that I considered unique and cool enough to sell.

Joe: *Hey, you're not talking to some chump from [The Gear Page](#)! I know perfectly well that 95% percent of boutique pedals are clones. Fess up!*

Joe: You're right. I haven't invented any new ways of generating distortion. Any overdrive pedal with a single transistor will probably echo the Rangemaster, LPB-1, or Electra Distortion. A pedal with two transistors will owe a debt to a Fuzz Face, and so on. So yeah, by that reckoning, my pedals aren't terribly original.

Joe: *So answer my first question already!*

Joe: Jeez! I don't remember you being such a dick when you interviewed Stevie Ray Vaughan or Johnny Marr.

Joe: *They weren't trying to sell me anything!*

Joe: [*Sighs.*] Okay, it's like this: Because I have a lot of experience designing and fine-tuning guitar sounds, and no electrical engineering chops whatsoever, there's only one way I *can* create circuits: I start with an extant circuit, and then I fuck with it.

Joe: *Can you dial down the language a bit?*

Joe: [*Rolls eyes.*] And then I *mess* with it. I swap out components, nudge values up and down, pop in parts of other circuits, or just yank stuff out. So yes, my Cult pedal is descended from the Rangemaster. The Duh and Filth pedals are also two-transistor fuzzes, so they owe something to the Fuzz Face, but they certainly don't sound anything like one. The Screech octave fuzz borrows tricks from the Ampeg Scrambler and Armstrong Green Ringer, but you'd have to be deaf to mistake it for either one. So yeah, my "engineering" isn't imaginative in the slightest. But for better or worse, my obsessive tweaking eventually generated unique-sounding pedals. I don't offer anything unless I believe it's cool and unique. [*Mops brow.*] Are we almost done?

Joe: *Why do you outsource production to Cusack?*

Joe: Because I can't build enough to keep up with even a modest demand, and I want to dedicate my time to playing, writing, and sound designing. Plus, the Cusack-built pedals are *better* than the ones I make myself. The two most frequent comments I get from users are "Wow, this is my favorite pedal!" and "It broke." My ear and imagination are strong. My shop skills are feeble. I went with Cusack because they're US-based, they make great stuff, and Cusack's Tony Lott is a brilliant engineer who goes out of his way to accommodate my oddball requests while routinely improving my designs. Same with the decision to sell via Vintage King—they're a high-end audio retailer universally renowned for superior expertise and customer service. Trust me—you'll be happier with their customer service than mine!

Joe: *I'm surprised your designs are so minimal.*

Joe: Me too! At first I'd assumed I'd make pedals with a zillion knobs. But I soon realized that sometimes adding knobs is the easy way out, especially if you just replace every resistor in a circuit with a pot. Meanwhile, the pedals that have lived on my pedalboard year after year tend to be really minimal, like the Klon Centaur and the Z. Vex Super Hard On. They commit to a particular point of view. Same with classic audio gear, like LA-2A compressors. Guitars, too—instruments with a strong point of view always inspire me more than ones that try to be chameleons. Also, minimal circuits just sound better. That sounds like a cliché, like "the best pleasures in life are simple." But I mean it quite literally. In most cases, the less crap you put between your guitar and your amp, the better your tone. So I just leave out all the crap.

Joe: *Like what?*

Joe: Conventional tone controls, for a start. A lot of fuzzes, for example, generate a cool distortion sound, decapitate it with a passive tone control, then boost it again to make up for the loss. That's why, to my ear, primitive distortion pedals without tone stacks, like Rangemasters, Fuzz Faces, and early Tone Benders, sound so much more bitchin' than later "refinements." Also, most conventional tone controls only sound cool through a fraction of their range. You'll almost always get better results if you ditch the tone stage and make adjustments at the amp, the guitar, or the fingers.

Joe: *So you basically make one-sound boxes?*

Joe: Nope. I *do* use tone controls of a sort, though they're usually input filters, or biasing tricks that make the distortion sound thicker or thinner. More important, I make everything as dynamically responsive as possible, even the high-gain fuzzes. You can get an enormous range of tones by adjusting your volume controls or playing technique. To my ear, most distortion effects have way too much gain, resulting in over-compressed sounds. If you've ever played a pedal that sounded massive in your bedroom, but seemed to vanish onstage with bass and drums, you know what I'm talking about. My pedals maintain strong note definition and don't smooth over your dynamics.

Joe: *Some players like pedals that smooth out their dynamics.*

Joe: That's cool. But they probably won't like my pedals.

Joe: *How come you're only making distortion pedals?*

Joe: [*Laughs.*] You mean, aside from the fact that they're easier to build than choruses and delays? Because guitar distortion is the one of the few areas where digital still lags behind analog. The best digital delays and reverbs sound as good or better than anything analog, with less cost, more convenience, and greater customizability. I'm perfectly happy generating any ambient or modulation effect with digital tools. But great transistor fuzzes still move more me than their digital approximations.

Joe: *Is that a joke? Everyone knows analog is always better.*

Joe: It is not!

Joe. *It is so!*

Joe: Is not!

Joe: *Is so!*