

## Sabine NexFX Stompboxes

BY JAKE KELLY

At a time when most effects manufacturers are concentrating on digital modeling and/or multi-effects floor units, Sabine has made the interesting choice of releasing a series of good ol' analog stomp boxes. Even more interesting, Sabine touts the new units as the next evolution in floor units (hence, the name—NexFX). When I think of stomp boxes, though, sometimes I can't help but think of the fate of dinosaurs—just before the fiery comet came streaking across a once-placid sky.

But, before you go whining to the editor or writing letters as fiery as that comet, let me tell you that I'm actually a big fan of stompboxes, in general, and of these new Sabine pedals, in particular.

### The Gear

Sabine sent us five of its six new pedal offerings: the Pedal Tuner, the Overdrive, the FuzzStortion, the Compressor and the StereoChorus. Let's start out by taking a look at the overall construction. Sabine is popular with lots of giggers because its stuff stands up to the abuse of real gigs—and these boxes are no exception. Each has a cast-metal enclosure that's painted in metallic colors as pretty as a Tucker auto. Each also sports an AC power adapter input *and* an output. Why? This is too hip—one adapter can power all your Sabine pedals. All you have to do is link the pedals with the included power jumper cables, and you're good to go! Other neat features include a removable battery-cover, metal-shaft pots that can handle the road and a control section that is backlit when the unit is in use. An amazing feature of these pedals is what you don't hear—even with the effects turned on, these things are *quiet*.

Each pedal has a 1/4" mono input and two 1/4" outputs. The Compressor, Overdrive and FuzzStortion have (switchable) effect and dry outputs for sending separate signals to different amps. The StereoChorus has left and right stereo outputs, and the Pedal Tuner has A and B outputs, which

means it can double as an A/B splitter. Wow!

The next evolution that the NexFX name refers to is the increased flexibility that these units provide, as compared to comparable units from other manufacturers. For example, the Overdrive offers a sustain control and two bands of EQ (mid and treble), in addition to the standard overdrive and level controls. The sustain control adjusts the amount of compression added to the circuit. At its lowest setting, the compression emulates the power tubes of a small amp being driven at full-throttle, and at higher settings it yields sustain for days. The mid and treble controls let you tailor the textures to your delight. My only quibble is that you can't turn the sustain circuitry completely off—you can hear artifacts of it even when the knob is turned all the way down. Still, the pedal sounds good and offers a large palette of tones.

I cannot say enough good things about the FuzzStortion. It also sports mid, treble and level controls, as well as a drive control and a center-detented control that has fuzz textures on the left and distortion on the right. I have become accustomed to distortion pedals that sound more like a blender than a guitar. So, I plugged my ears as I plugged my guitar into this pedal and switched on my amp. However, instead of

having my head torn off, I was rewarded with the most musical tones I have ever heard from a stompbox. In fact, I was unable to find an unusable setting on this thing. Heavier shred textures are achievable by turning up the treble and mid controls, but it can also serve up sounds reminiscent of a small amp being overdriven. In fact, that's the best way to describe this unit: It sounds like an amp. Need I say more?

The Compressor has no special surprises, though it gives you more parameter control than your usual stompbox compressors. It has threshold, attack, ratio, tone and level controls that function in the usual manner. The primary attraction of this compressor is that it sounds more like the classic Boss CS-2 (the best stompbox compressor ever, in my opinion) than anything else I have heard.

The StereoChorus has the speed and depth controls, but also has dry/wet, tone and auto-pan controls. The nice thing, though, is that it lacks the cold, metallic sound so common in some chorus units—which is a good thing. Modest depth and dry/wet settings allow for almost subliminal chorusing, while higher settings blossom full and lush (which is not my thing, but it might be yours).



## GRADE CHART AND PRICE LIST

- NexFX-5200 Overdrive: B+ \$119.95
- NexFX-5100 FuzzStortion: A+ (an overachiever) \$119.95
- NexFX-5300 StereoChorus: A+ \$169.95
- NexFX-5400 Compressor: A \$129.95
- NexFX-5000 Pedal Tuner: A \$119.95

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As anyone who has lived through the '80s knows, chorusing excels in stereo settings, and the StereoChorus come with an auto-pan control. The best way to describe this is as a secondary chorus unit. While your slower settings swish between speakers, turning up the auto-pan introduces what sounds like a second chorus that's operating at a higher speed. No, really, it does. This is a pretty nifty way to broaden your stereo spread and add another dimension to your sound.

Now, it shouldn't be a surprise that one of the new NexFX pedals is a tuner. Sabine pretty much built its reputation on affordable, accurate tuners of various types—ranging from guitar-mounted to table-top models. I like this stompbox version the most. For starters, the footswitch acts as an output muter (although the tuner remains on if you choose not to mute the output). The units LEDs are arranged in a VU meter shape and are bright enough to read on a sunny day on an outdoor stage (I know because I played an outdoor gig with it). Even better, the LED "needle" remains steady enough to allow accurate tuning, unlike other units' wobbly needles can't do. The tuner has the usual calibration and flat-tuning features, accessible through the top mounted buttons. Fortunately, the tuner refuses to let other instruments mess with the tuning process when you're tuning onstage—which is something some units *cannot* claim.

Sure, the NexFX pedals are dinosaurs. But dinosaurs are among the most successful creatures to ever walk the Earth. Their reign lasted 200 million years (according to my son, Dylan, a dinosaur expert!), compared to man's measly 2 million years of being top dog. I'm sure that they'll be around and preferred by many for as long as we use fossil fuel to generate electricity—maybe even longer. Sabine's units not only hold their own against the "old guard," but they also offer interesting options that increase flexibility and offer new sounds. 