



EarthQuaker Devices Sunn O))) HalfLife Octave Distortion & Booster

EQD's HalfLife pedal delivers the droned, bottom-heavy fury inspired by Sunn O))) with uncompromising force

BY PAUL RIARIO

IT SEEMS EARTHQUAKER Devices is in a constant flux between light and dark duality — call it Yin and Yang, if you will — across most of its recognized pedals. On one side, it's known for beautifully ambient pedals that create luminous soundscapes, while the other side unleashes bellowing, sonic mayhem. Its latest stompbox, the Sunn O))) HalfLife Octave Distortion & Booster, firmly falls under the latter description. The HalfLife stompbox (as you probably guessed with its play on words) is a more compact, condensed and pedalboard-friendly version of the Sunn O))) Life pedal, and lives on as a successful ongoing collaboration between Sunn O))) — the loudest of drone metal doomsayer bands — and EQD.

HalfLife is also the standard-issue successor to the extremely limited-edition Sunn O))) HalfLife Fer MMXXV, which featured a striking, cast-iron enclosure made using a centuries-old Nanbu-tekki casting technique. Like the Life Pedal before it, HalfLife is designed to capture Sunn O)))'s core front-end signal chain driving multiple vintage Sunn Model T 100-watt tube stacks into glorious saturation. As an aside, and as someone who owns the V3 version of the Life pedal, I can declare the current HalfLife stompbox doesn't half-ass any of the chaos-inducing tones of its predecessor.

Build quality

Do I even need to talk about build quality? Like all the other stompboxes in its stable, this EQD is about as solidly built as they come and employs premium components. Housed in a rugged, textured enclosure with contrasting red and black spirals, the pedal pairs distortion with a blend-able octave up at the first stage with the Amplitude footswitch, while the Magnitude footswitch activates the second stage — an all-discrete MOSFET clean booster.

Controls for Octave, Filter, and Distortion occupy the top portion of the pedal, and just below that are Mag (output volume for Boost), Clip (Clipping switch for OpAmp, Asymm or Symm modes), and Amp (output volume for Octave/Distortion). I would also urge anyone to become very familiar with where each specific control is because the tiny UV screen-printed characters are nearly impossible to read from above — just in case you need to make any heat-of-battle adjustments on a dark stage.

Rounding out its features are standard 9VDC power, an expression jack for Octave blending, and EQD's proprietary Flexi-Switch technology for seamless momentary or latching true bypass operation.

Usability and features

Inspired by the vintage Shin-Ei FY2 Companion and FY6 Super Fuzz boxes and a vintage white-logo RAT distortion-style circuit, with a low-pass filter control, there isn't much to deal with in this triple-threat of a stompbox arriving in a more pedalboard-friendly size. Most of your guesswork will be made by using your ears and selecting which of the three clipping modes will provide the utmost in aural black magic.

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The first OpAmp removes the clipping diodes entirely, unleashing its full output for an aggressively brighter, high-volume attack. Assym employs an asymmetrical clipping configuration using two silicon diodes and one LED, producing a slightly compressed, smoother amp-like crunch. Finally, Symm recreates the original double silicon diode configuration, delivering the classic, familiar rodent-like saturation that made the white-logo circuit a favorite.

Unlike the original Life Pedal, which features a dedicated Octave footswitch, HalfLife's upper octave is only controlled by dialing it in using the O knob or controlled dynamically with an expression pedal connected to the Octave EXP jack, allowing the octave to be blended in as needed.

The final Magnitude stage is designed to overload your preamp tubes with a clean, high-impedance boost while preserving your amp's natural character, driving it harder without adding coloration or introducing distortion of its own.

Sounds

Whether paired with single coils or humbuckers, HalfLife delivers a thundering octave/distortion experience tailor-made for doom architects and those who poke around in subterranean noise.

While it nods heavily to the classic ProCo Rat design, it departs from its saturation in a more symphonic fuzz-stortion that's tightly layered and articulate. What's interesting is you can hear the fuzzy textures become progressively darker in its clipping modes as you sweep from the brighter and grittier frequencies found on OpAmp, to the warmly compressed Big Muff-style saturation in Asymm, and finally plummeting down to the deep hirsute fuzziness in Symm mode.

I can only imagine that if I brooded in bands like Boris and Burning Witch, I would dwell within the sludgy depths of Symm mode.

The highly responsive Filter knob sweeps from dense darkness to the cutting slice reminiscent of a cranked Sunn Model T's Brite channel. The upper octave tracks clearly on single notes above the ninth fret, provided you are flying high with your neck pickup.

Here, the spiked upper octave tones add a clanging, metallic ring to the signal. It's an intensely fun pedal that can easily coax the bottom-heavy fuzz found on Gish-era Smashing Pumpkins as well as the shimmering, furry pulse of My Bloody Valentine's Loveless album (Yes, I'm dating myself).

Finally, the highly transparent Magnitude clean boost is loud with a capital "L." Be mindful of your level setting, as its massive output — combined with the Amplitude stage — can quickly push an amplifier into explosive meltdown and endless sustain. Not that there's anything wrong with that!

Verdict

Whether it admits it or not, EarthQuaker Devices knows exactly how to weaponize distortion — and it's quite good at it. Any aspiring dirt purveyor worth their salt will naturally gravitate toward the HalfLife's crushing wall of sound. For players seeking targeted drone strikes of blend-able upper-octave fuzz, aggressive distortion, and a powerful clean boost designed to push an amplifier into massive, amp-melting territory, the HalfLife delivers the droned, bottom-heavy fury inspired by Sunn O))) with uncompromising force.

GUITAR WORLD VERDICT

★★★★½

With its combination of brutality and flexibility, the Sunn O))) HalfLife Octave Distortion & Booster is a true "FAFO" pedal for sonic mayhem. It unleashes a full-scale assault of saturated ecstasy, proving once again that this Machiavellian alliance with those shadowy Sunn O))) guitarists is a notorious victory for EQD.

PROS

+ Sunn O)))'s Life Metal octave, distortion and boost tones in a compact pedal.
+ Massive distortion/fuzz, powerful clean boost.
+ Expression input for the Octave effect.

CONS

- Pricey.
- Drone or doom metal tones are not for everyone.

SPECS

TYPE: Analog Octave, Distortion and Boost
MADE: USA
CONTROLS: Octave, Filter, Distortion, Magnitude, Amplitude
FEATURES: Three-mode clipping, octave-up, expression pedal control
CONNECTIVITY: 2 x 1/4" instrument and 1 x 1/4" Octave Expression input
BYPASS: True bypass with Flexi-Switch technology
POWER: 9V DC center-negative; 15 mA current draw
DIMENSIONS: 127 × 70 x 57 mm
WEIGHT: 0.74 lb

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