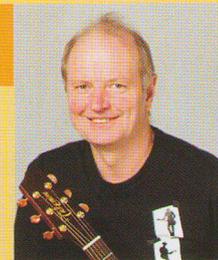




with Kevin Downing



Effect Pedal Chains

I'm regularly asked about effects pedals (also called stomp boxes) and what order to have them in. This is a very subjective area and honestly I didn't know quite where to start because the subject is huge. I will assume you have a few pedals already, or are perhaps wanting to buy a few to get started. And we won't get into computer-based, or rack effects here, only floor-based single unit pedals.

Even top players have differing opinions on what order they should be connected in to get a great sound, but there is an order that seems to work for most players. This is it:

Guitar -- [Tuner] -- [Wah Wah] -- [Octave] -- [Noise Gate] -- [Compressor] -- [Overdrive/Distortion] -- [EQ] -- [Pitch] -- [Modulation] -- [Level] -- [Delay] -- [Reverb] -- Amp

Of course few players would use this many pedals as it can get a bit noisy. Indeed many top players take a minimal approach with only a few pedals and using the overdrive on their amplifiers. For the best overdriven amplifier sounds you'll want to have a valve amp of course.

Always plug your guitar into the pedals with quality cables -- don't use cheap stuff. Make sure you are using quality cables to join all your pedals up as well. Use only those very short cables between effects, or the quality of sound will drop off immediately.

Tuner -- It's best to have one in the rack with true 'Bypass', so the signal is not running through the tuner constantly.

Wah Wah -- This is one place where players can differ. Hendrix had his wah before the distortion, but others like it after. A lot will depend on what kind of wah or overdrive pedals you have, so do try them out in different combinations.

Noise Gates -- These pedals help you suppress the hissing sounds that pedal boards can generate. If, like me, you don't use a lot of gain or a lot of pedals, you might not need one.

Compressors -- These normally come before overdrives, but I never use a compressor and overdrive together. The compressor for me, is only used to get a good clean 1970s funk sound.

Overdrives/Distortion -- Many players have at least two overdrives in their pedal boards. One for heavy metal type sounds and maybe one for more bluesy type sounds. The Fuzzface pedal made famous by Hendrix, which gives a more 1960s type fuzzy sound, is still very popular as well.

EQ -- This pedal can shape your sound to suit the song. It can also be used as a boost pedal if used correctly.

Pitch -- These pedals are normally vibrato, whammy, pitch shifters and octaves.

Modulation -- These pedals include chorus, univibe, flangers, and envelope filters.

Level -- Typically a volume pedal. I only need one when playing Gibson guitars where the volume knob is normally a long way from my little finger. Sometimes I use the volume pedal at the beginning of the chain, just before overdrives, or just before delays. It depends on the gig and type of music being played.

Delays -- Include digital and analogue delays, and even the older tape delays like the Watkins Copycat.

Reverb -- Spring reverb is typically built into amplifiers, however, I prefer the digital reverb pedals as you get more different types of reverb, and more control over the sound the pedal produces.

Tips for using pedals:

1. It pays to use only power as pedals eat batteries fast. If you are using batteries, make sure to unplug your guitar whenever you put it down. And always check the battery status before any important gig.

2. Buy pedals with 'True Bypass' if you can. There are helpful people around who will install 'true bypass' into your existing pedals, or hot rod them as well.

3. I recommend you buy each pedal separately so you can take time to learn how to use it to best effect. You need to learn what the pedal can produce and be able to dial up sounds quickly.

4. If you have more than two pedals invest in a pedal board. They are not expensive.

5. It also makes sense to have a different pedal board for electric and acoustic guitars.

6. Don't forget to experiment with different pedals and the order of your pedals. The ideas mentioned above are just mine.

7. Be careful not to let the pedals take over the music. Use your pedals in a musical way, they should be there to enhance the music.

What are the best pedals to buy first? I recommend you buy a distortion or overdrive pedal first if you don't have a quality one within your amp. Play them in the shop before you buy so you know it fits the style of music you play. There are many different types for many different genres of music. Almost all modern music uses either a clean sound, a crunch sound (slightly overdriven -- especially heard in rhythm guitar parts), and a more overdriven part as heard in many solos.

Secondly, I would get a digital delay. You hear the delayed sounds on many rhythm and solo guitar parts. It's best to buy one with a 'tap tempo' setting.

Third, I would get a chorus or univibe pedal as made popular by Hendrix. Many guitar players like the univibe effect over a chorus pedal, but check them both out.

Fourth, a wah wah pedal. Although you most probably won't use a wah pedal much on stage or in jam sessions, it is real fun to experiment with it at home. They can take a bit of getting used to, and many players use them to alter their tone settings.

The photo is of my electric pedal board, minus all the leads so you can see it better.

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher, and author based in Palmerston North. His contact details, along with many freebies, are on his website at www.guitar.co.nz

