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Gizmo Alert

Tech 21 Comptortion

It seems simple enough—a nifty little stompbox that combines analog compression and distortion. But the Comptortion (\$125) is actually a formidable tone shaper that acts more like a compact guitar preamp than a one- or two-trick pedal. Armed with four extremely interactive controls—level, tone, “Tortion,” and comp—the Comptortion can produce a wide range of timbres when the effects are mixed together or used separately.

The rotary level control kicks in up to 12dB of gain, and is powerful enough to overdrive your amp’s front end, or to boost a solo out of the stage mix. The passive, high-cut tone control is configured so that when the knob is cranked full up the input signal is flat. The frequency cut can be a life-saver if your mixture of distortion and compression produces a hurtful sizzle.

Tortion dials in everything from a cranky, Stones-like overdrive to a full-on ‘80s shred. Although the timbre veers toward the steely, the Comptortion doesn’t impose a ready-made buzz on every guitar you plug into it. Even at full distortion the pedal honors the character of your guitar: a Les Paul produces a creamier, less-edgy timbre than a Strat.

The Comptortion’s compression is delightfully aggressive. Turn the knob past 2 o’clock and the sustain is so intense that it’s almost EBow-like. Back the control down to 11 o’clock, and you get a bluesy, Paul Kossoff-like wail. There are tons of tones available with the compressor alone. With the Comp turned off, however, I still noticed limiting when using a Les Paul. (Tech 21 acknowledges that limiting is always active and that the effect is input dependent.)



Mixing between the four controls is where the sounds really get interesting, but extreme settings can turn on you. String noise is objectionable at higher compression levels, and the factory-set noise gate (actually a downward expander) tends to chatter as blistering sounds fade to silence.

Housed in a bulletproof case and powered by either a 9-volt battery or optional power supply, the Comptortion is a little jewel. It's not purely a plug-in-and-rage device, as the pedal's benefits are only fully revealed after some tweaking. However, you'll be rewarded for your efforts with an impressive palette of tonal colors. —MICHAEL MOLENDIA

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