

BACK IN THE ★ U.S.S.R. ★



5 PEDALS FROM BEHIND
THE IRON CURTAIN

The years following World War II represented some of the most tumultuous times in history for Soviet-US relations.

Fear of communism, indoctrination, and nuclear annihilation was rife in the USA, and musicians from both sides of the pond were quick to catch onto this panic, reflecting it in their art. Songs like "Back in the U.S.S.R." by the Beatles, "Ivan Meets G.I. Joe" by The Clash, and "Leningrad" by Billy Joel are just a few songs that artists wrote to depict different experiences of the threat from behind the Iron Curtain, spanning the years of 1945 to 1989. One side of history that isn't as widely covered in schools or history books is the experience on the other side of the curtain from a musical and artistic standpoint. Economically, Russia was all but shut off to the world, but musically, "bootleg" rock n' roll from the West and Russia's own brand of rebellious music was what many historians say was one of the main catalysts to the fall of the Soviet Union.

There is very little known about the Soviet pedals from before the fall of the Union, and even less known about the companies themselves that built them. There is a lot of misinformation, and unless you can read Cyrillic or happen to live in Russia you are out of luck to

find any confirmable facts on the pedals themselves. All we have to go on is our eyes and our ears, which really forces you to listen and process what you're hearing, without getting caught up in the specs.

One thing to realize is that the effects from back then are very different, and seemed more like novelty devices and less like musical tools. A lot of the functions are downright strange, and when you have no standard or template to go off, you can get some very strange operational designs and even stranger sounds. Many Soviet pedals were of shoddy quality and were not built to last, hence the pretty awful state most of those pedals are in nowadays. They also featured five-pin DIN jacks as opposed to the standard quarter-inch jacks we are used to, adding to the mystery.

Now before we go into the actual pedals themselves, I would like to say that we will *not* be including the Electro-Harmonix and Sovtek pedals, because these are not original designs out of the Soviet Union. The Big Muff, Small Stone, Electric Mistress, and the like were all designed by Mike Matthews in America, and were only *manufactured* by Russian companies. For this feature we will stick to purely Soviet designs, and stay away from the obvious Sovtek designs.



PEDAL 1: POLTAVA FUZZ WAH

Let's kick things off with a really obscure but incredibly cool tone machine. The Poltava Fuzz Wah is a treadled hybrid fuzz-wah-vibrato-tremolo. The Soviets were big fans of packing absolutely everything into one box, and this pedal is no exception. Thankfully, there is no Cyrillic here (save for the little red button between the pots which is essentially the "engage" switch), and the universal language of pictures drives the controls here. Those two red arcade-like buttons are for engaging the two effects; the bottom one is for the fuzz and the top is for the wah and LFO. From top to

bottom, the controls are Tone, Volume, and LFO speed. When using the wah, you'll find it's a completely normal wah until you reach the full toe position, which is when the LFO engages. It's a chugging throbbly mess of a tone, and it couldn't be more beautiful. Adding the primitive fuzz into the mix makes this thing whirl and scream in strange and messed up ways you have probably never heard before. If you want to hear how it sounds, look up the demo from the ever-excellent Soviet Guitar Effects on YouTube.

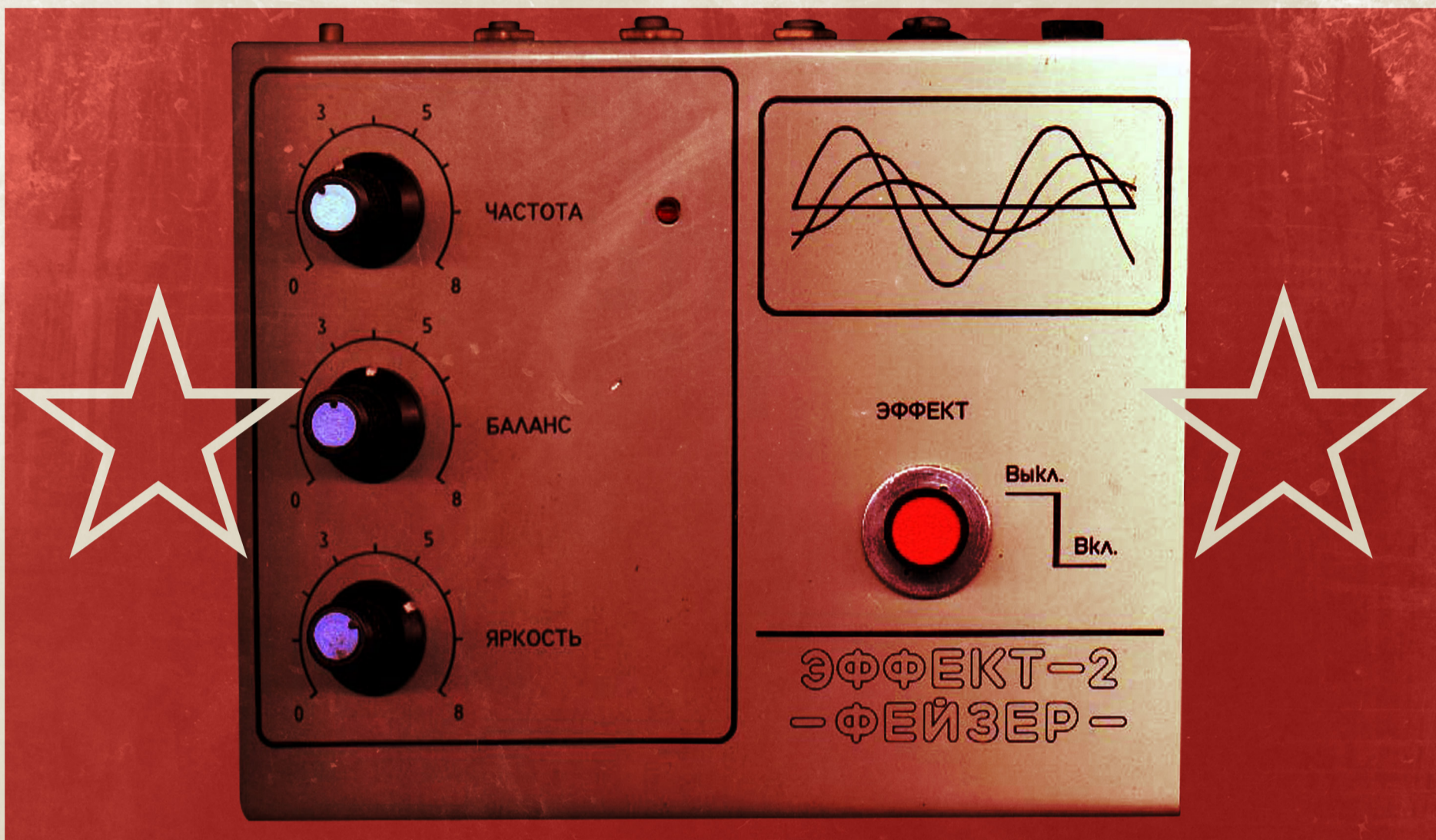


PEDAL 2: KAZAN BOOSTER

Although the name may be a little off, this treadled (seeing a pattern here?) unit is far from a simple booster. Where this pedal has got a strange *modus operandi* is in the treadle itself; for all intents and purposes it's a normal fuzz, but the Soviets decided to make the bypass function a huge treadle as opposed to just a switch. It's a loud, primitive, and biting fuzz that bares its teeth with massive and spitty harmonics that sound like the love-child of a Univox Super Fuzz, and an old germanium Fuzz Face. On the bottom of this pedal it says "booster," and from right to left on the

knobs, it says "Volume" and "Tone."

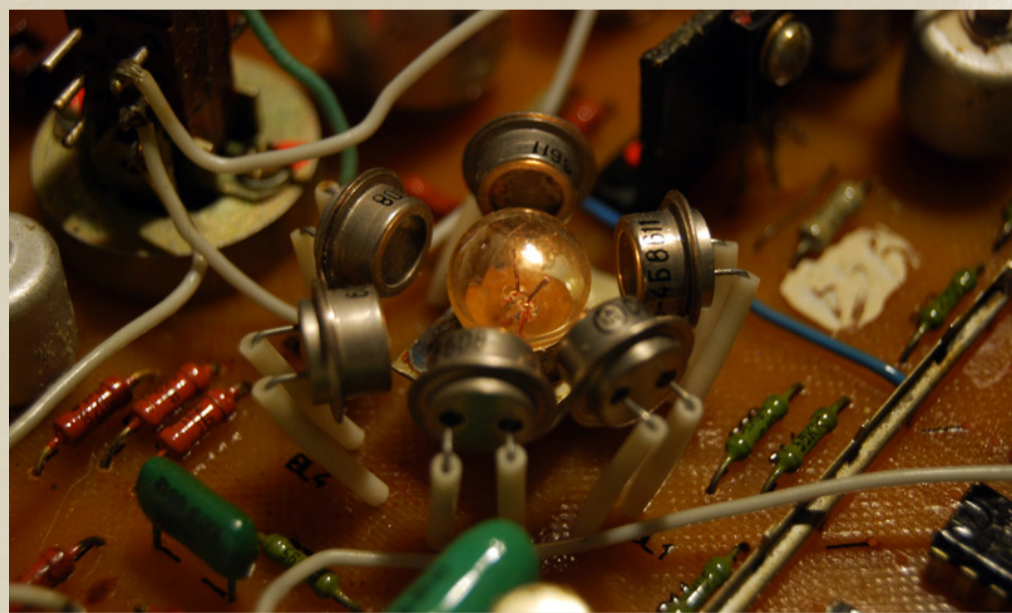
"...FOR ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES IT'S A NORMAL FUZZ, BUT THE SOVIETS DECIDED TO MAKE THE BYPASS FUNCTION A HUGE TREADLE AS OPPOSED TO JUST A SWITCH."



PEDAL 3: ESTRADIN EFFEKT-2 PHASER

This is perhaps one of the coolest on the list, and it is definitely the most fully featured. It's an optical six-stage phaser that is an "unabashed Mu-Tron II clone" according to our resident circuit expert Nicholas Kula. In the picture below, you can see the six photocells surrounding the little bulb in the middle, which is essentially the heart of this circuit. It's a very liquid sounding phaser, that's got a very slight resonant quality to it. The optical circuit adds warmth and subtlety, and it's capable of low and wide sweeps to pulsating and dissonant chops. It's got a fair bit of noise to it, but such is the case with the older Russian effects. From top to bottom on the left side, the knobs read "Frequency," "Balance" and "Brightness." The red button on the

right reads "Effect," which is the bypass switch. This pedal is also capable of wet and dry outputs, and it also contains a switchable bias on the back. Pretty awesome!



Here is a picture of the photo-optical heart of the Estradin Phaser, notice the six photocells surrounding the little light bulb.



PEDAL 4: ELEKTRONIKA VENTA PE-11 FLANGER

Staying in the vein of modulations, this flanger from Elektronika is perhaps one of the most liquid analog flangers I have heard outside of the original 18-volt Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress. This flanger was made towards the end of the Soviet era, which is why most of the labels are in English. The controls here are standard flanger fare, and nothing really to write home about. In the picture here, we can see the characteristic DIN sockets, with strangely enough, pseudo-stereo outs. It's big, it's orange, it's beautiful, and it don't need no man.

“...THIS FLANGER FROM ELEKTRONIKA IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST LIQUID ANALOG FLANGERS I HAVE HEARD OUTSIDE OF THE ORIGINAL 18-VOLT ELECTRO-HARMONIX ELECTRIC MISTRESS.”



PEDAL 5: LELL CZ DIGITAL DELAY

Lell is one of Russia's claims to fame when it comes to purely Russian-made effects. They were Russia's ersatz Boss after the fall of the Soviet Union, and their effects were found absolutely everywhere, as opposed to the Elektronika or Poltava products, which were much harder to find. This digital delay has a whole range of controls, with all of them being written in Cyrillic. It's got some of the weirdest sounds I've ever heard a delay produce, and it's got a general corny and cheap aesthetic to it; a budget Russian homage to Boss, as it were. This pedal has two functions, "Chorus" and "Reverb." "Reverb" is your standard delay setting, while "Chorus" modulates the pitch on the repeats, creating a seasick vibrato effect. The top two knobs from left to right read "Depth" (which controls the

depth of the modulation) and "Delay". The bottom three read "Input" (which is input gain), "Feedback," and "Level." It's an odd pedal for sure, but definitely an interesting choice for those into more off-the-beaten path sounds.

I hope you enjoyed our excursion into the strange land of Soviet effects. As you can see we have some incredibly strange pedals here that are usually rare and hard to find, due mostly in part to their shoddy quality control, strange designs, and general unavailability throughout most of the world outside of Russia. These pedals are far from cult-classic (yet), but for those of you into strange and otherworldly sounds and effects, catch 'em before some burgeoning noise rock guitarist does, and the price shoots through the roof. Happy trails my friends!