

# Z-Vex Pedals

**Price: £199, £269, £235** The Fuzz Factory, Fuzz Probe and Seek Wah are hand made from scratch in the USA and could well be the maddest FX pedals we've ever played

COMING FROM THE maelstrom of genius that is the brain of creator Zachary Vex, these effects pedals (a magnificent seven in total) have attracted the usual suspects of tonal insanity such as Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, Billy Corgan, Robert Fripp, Joe Satriani, and Adrian Belew who are long-time Z-Vex fans. According to sources Stateside, it was the Fuzz Factory that started the whole thing off so that seems as good a place as any to uncover the range's unique tonal delights.

## Fuzz factory

Of the three pedals on review this is easily the most conventional. Its small yet perfectly formed steel chassis, which is around two-thirds the size of a cigarette packet, has been hand-

### Spec check

#### FUZZ FACTORY

**PRICE:** £199 **ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Fuzz stompbox

**FEATURES:** Volume, gate, compression, drive and stability controls

**MIDI:** No **DISPLAY:** None

**CONNECTIONS:** Mono input and output **POWER:** One 9V battery **CONTACT:** Sounds Great 0161 436 4799

**WEB:** www.zvex.com

Painted, labelled, and varnished, which gives it a real boutique feel – currently all the rage.

It shares its controls with the Fuzz Probe. The familiar volume and drive knobs are kept company by a compress pot, a stability knob and a gate control. It's the latter trio that add the fun.

The construction includes a couple of new old-stock germanium transistors, but Vex is keen to point out that the Fuzz Factory is all his own work and isn't intended to perform like any specific vintage fuzz-tone. That's a shame, as at the most basic level, the pedal sounds just like an original Big Muff, giving a squashy, fruity drive that makes a Lovetone Cheese Source sound like a sweet Fender Champ just ticking over.

Mind you, this isn't even half the story. By reducing the Gate, you can get the most serious squealy yet musical feedback even at bedroom volumes. The actual noise, just like the old Boss Distortion/Feedbacker, isn't the genuine 'amp' article but, by playing with both the stability and compress controls, you can actually alter the pitch of the

signal to match the key of your song or whatever. The effect of this is along the lines of a bastardised Digitech Whammy. Whenever you dampen the strings, the squeal comes back and it's possible, with some sick timing, to use the Fuzz Factory as a drone note to anything you



A brilliant idea but exactly when would it be 'right' to use this pedal?

want to play.

The actual drive tones define the phrase 'organic'. So squishy is even the most subdued Fuzz Factory overdrive that you can almost smell the compost, and you just hope that Charlie Dimmock isn't lurking close by. A strangely satisfying start...

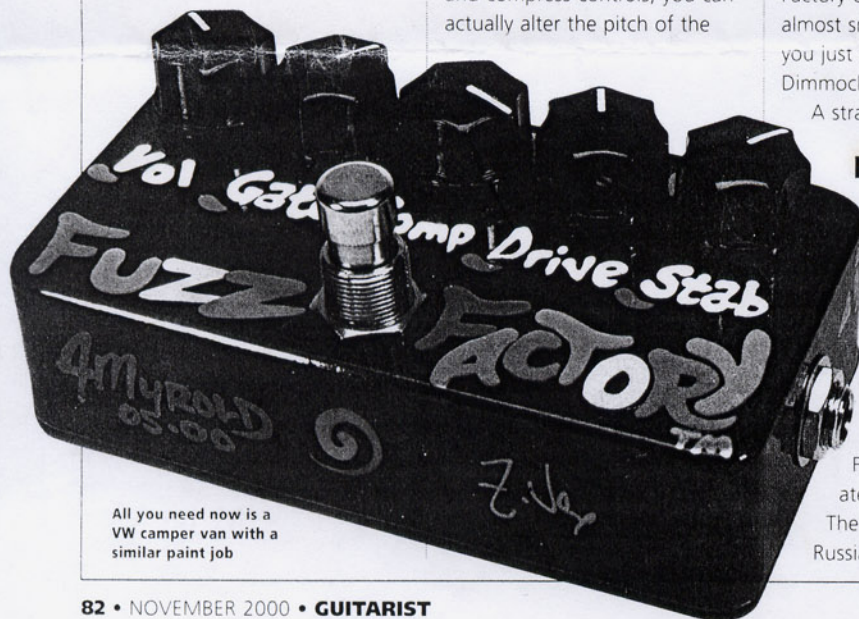
Theremin demo of sorts). Lacking the proper scientific qualifications, we turned to the Theremin Fan Base (www.scifi.com) for an explanation of how it works:

"The basic principle behind the Theremin is known as 'heterodyning' – the mixing of two signals of different frequencies and extracting their difference. The pitch circuit of the Theremin uses two radio-frequency oscillators, one fixed and one variable, to create this effect. Moving the hands near the pitch antenna changes the speed of the variable oscillator and the difference between the two comes out as a musical note. The volume cir-

## Fuzz probe

This is where things start to get really strange. To quote Mr Vex himself, "you must be insane. Even I don't know how to use this pedal."

Thanks, then. The Fuzz Probe is a Fuzz Factory with a foot-operated Theremin. The Theremin was invented by Russian physicist Lev



All you need now is a VW camper van with a similar paint job

### The rivals

- DOD FX25 Envelope Filter **£50**
- Electro-Harmonix Q-Tron **£189**
- Lovetone Cheese Source **£239**

## Zachary Vex wasn't born to follow

From the moment you take delivery of a Z-Vex pedal, you are in no doubt as to its 'alternative' credentials. Our trio came in a plain cardboard box stuffed with polystyrene chips, buried under which were the pedals – each one wrapped in red cheesecloth and tied with elastic hair bubbles of the kind you might find adorning the pigtailed of a young girl. We could tell which pedal was which by the hand-written labels stuck to the

cloth. This 'green' appeal is enhanced by the pedals' reduced power consumption – they draw roughly 10 times less voltage than an average stomp box.



cuit works in much the same

way. Most Theremins have a range of three to five octaves." The Theremin part of the Fuzz Probe is the large copper plate that's fixed to the clear acrylic wedge-shaped housing which incorporates a Fuzz Factory at the other end. Basically, the closer you have your foot to the plate, the more you interrupt the field of RF energy that it produces, thus the pitch of the 'interference' is altered.

The best way we can describe the sound is by referring to most Rage Against The Machine tracks where guitarist Tom Morello pulls off those amazing B-movie whines and hoots (he uses a Whammy pedal). With the gate closed slightly, you can also alter the sound of the fuzz itself in the same manner while playing. It works best as a chord is held and the sound decays – you can get some excellent growls simply by hovering the sole of your foot over the plate.

## Seek wah

Actually, this is less of a wah and more of a pulsating tremolo with extra throb and a side-order of imagination – why does it have a ladybird painted on the control panel for a start?

Please excuse more lyrical waxing but, again, the best way to describe the Seek Wah is to imagine you had eight wah pedals lined up, each operated by a thought-controlled robot that depressed their treadle at both a frequency and depth predetermined by you, the player.

The pedal features eight small controls, each with their own 'intensity' LED, that allows you to feed the guitar signal through any number of virtual wah pedals, or steps, at a speed determined by the final control knob – the one on the far left. It's also possible to determine the number of steps, either four, six or eight, via the micro switch beneath the speed control. To be honest, for the best results, we would go for eight every time. To reiterate, this isn't an auto wah, this is a unique pedal in its own right and is arguably the most inspirational we've ever come across.

Plugging in and turning, for example, three of the buttons to 12 o'clock, you can get a pulsating rhythm for either chords or single-note passages and only a little experimentation can lead you to a monstrous groove – one that really eats away at the

clock! For one of the richest tremolos you'll ever experience, simply turn each of the knobs to around nine o'clock – quite a subtle setting – and use the speed control to ape anything the modern Electro-Harmonix catalogue has to offer.

The Seek Wah doesn't have any truck with a Nile Rodgers-style funky wah – you'll still need your trusty Jim

Dunlop for that – but for atmospheric throbs and rhythms, you'll be quids in.

## Conclusions

Cast your mind back to our classic May 1999 issue of *Guitarist* in which Skunk Anansie's Ace proved, on our CD, just how he's trying to turn the world of pedals on its head by innovative use of half-a-

It's like having eight wah pedals in a line, but with a ladybird...



dozen classic stompers in a row. If the aural textures our man was coming up with made your cat throw up and made you go and lie down muttering "what would Hank say?" then Z-Vex

ain't gonna be for you. However, if you thought that Ace's demos were the most amazing thing you'd heard for years, then one or all of these three enigmatic items could be just up your street.

Price-wise, they're not cheap, and the waiting time can be a little long. Also, Z-Vex says that no two boxes are alike, which may concern the more traditional players out there. UK distribu-

## Spec check

### SEEK WAH

**PRICE:** £235 **ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Auto wah-cum-tremolo stompbox **FEATURES:** Micro switch for number of steps.

speed knob, eight wah-setting controls (see text) **MIDI:** No

**DISPLAY:** Eight LEDs

**CONNECTIONS:** Mono input and output **POWER:** One 9V battery **CONTACT:** Sounds Great

0161 436 4799

**WEB:** www.zvex.com

### FUZZ FACTORY

**BUILD QUALITY** ●●●●●

**FEATURES** ●●●●●

**SOUND** ●●●●●

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ●●●●●

**VERDICT** ●●●●●

**WE LIKED** The fruity vegetableness of the drives

**WE DISLIKED** May be too 'organic' for some

### SEEK WAH

**BUILD QUALITY** ●●●●●

**FEATURES** ●●●●●

**SOUND** ●●●●●

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ●●●●●

**VERDICT** ●●●●●

**WE LIKED** The most unique stand-alone stompbox of the last few years

**WE DISLIKED** Takes some time to set-up, but it's worth it

### FUZZ PROBE

**BUILD QUALITY** ●●●●●

**FEATURES** ●●●●●

**SOUND** ●●●●●

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ●●●●●

**VERDICT** ●●●●●

**WE LIKED** A genuine alternative to a real Theremin

**WE DISLIKED** Requires some pretty accurate foot movements