



Universal Audio

UAFX Enigmatic ‘82 Overdrive Special

Has UA committed heresy with its digitization of the holy grail of guitar tone? We find out...

By Matt McCracken

BASED UPON ARGUABLY the most famous of Alexander ‘Howard’ Dumble’s designs, the Universal UAFX Enigmatic ‘82 Overdrive is the latest in a line of iconic amps made minute by the California company. Much more than just another Dumble-style overdrive pedal, this fudge-colored amp emulator looks to give us guitarists access to some of the most fabled tones of guitar history.

Unless you recently won the lottery or you’re the spawn of some famous musician, chances are you won’t have played a Dumble. I certainly haven’t, but I’m well aware of the sweet tones they offer, as well as the players like John Mayer, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Carlos Santana who’ve all had one hand built for them. Harmonically rich on the drive channel with a fast and responsive clean tone, the Dumble is one of the holy grails of guitar tone.

The Dumble Overdrive Special is unlike most other amps as all of those in existence were manufactured by one person, usually for famous guitar players. The OS is the most famous of all of Dumble’s amps, and although they do differ from decade to decade, each of them features the same two-channel construction, where the clean channel ‘cascades’ into the drive channel.

It certainly makes for an interesting - and some might say blasphemous - proposition, digitizing such a famous amplifier down to a series of 1s and 0s, but if this pedal amp gets me closer to those epic Dumble tones I’m all for it.

Build quality

Apparently the color has proven quite divisive amongst the online community - but I love it. The chassis gives me salted caramel fudge vibes and amongst the other pedals on my pedalboard, it definitely stands out. Even my partner – a drummer who couldn’t care less about guitar pedals – gave it some appreciative coos when I showed her the latest delivery to land on my review desk.

It feels rock solid in your hands, and I’d have no qualms about gigging it. All the UA gear I’ve encountered is generally pretty robust so it’s not much of a surprise. Six sturdy knobs on the front panel give you lots of tone control, with each of the knobs doubling up when you use the alt switch in the middle.

It means as well as getting control over your usual volume, overdrive, and three-band EQ, you can also control the room sound and get finer EQ controls with deep, presence, and bright controls. On either side of the utilitarian middle switch, you have options for further tonal control, allowing you to select four different cab models, as well as a dedicated mode control for rock, jazz, or custom.

Usability

Dialing in sounds is pretty easy from the off. Everything is labeled clearly so you shouldn’t need to dive into the manual to start getting usable sounds from the UAFX Enigmatic.

From the off, I was able to get a lovely clean tone dialed in, save it as a preset, then switch to the second channel to start honing in my overdrive sounds. The two-channel operation makes it super versatile whether you’re using it on its own or as part of a larger pedalboard setup.

The Enigmatic offers full stereo with both ins and outs so you can hook it up to more complex rigs. The inputs and outputs are



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closely gathered around the power socket though which is a little awkward if you’re regularly unplugging stuff. It’s a minor qualm though, and I’d expect most people will have it permanently set up somewhere.

The insert of the box promises more tones, but unfortunately, the app wouldn’t work for me on my Android phone. A quick Google search showed that this is a wider problem with the app, which is a real shame as I was quite looking forward to messing with the tone stack and designing my own Dumble.

Sounds

If this is what a Dumble sounds like, then I can see why everyone rates them so highly. The articulation is sensational even with the overdrive knob cranked, and every note rings true no matter what you’re playing. Paired with my Telecaster I was able to get a huge variety of sounds, but I started with a clean tone on the ‘Jazz’ voice to begin with, turning the overdrive knob into the off position.

Here you get a very Fender-eque clean tone with that signature dip in the mids. It’s hefty in the lows and exuberant in the high end. The clarity is astonishingly good all across the spectrum and played through an FRFR speaker it’s hard to believe that the tones are coming out of a pedal. It responds dynamically too, you can dig in and get a little extra breakup which sounds really natural.

Cranking the overdrive knob and switching to the ‘Rock’ voice, I’m immediately greeted with that silky smooth-driven sound with plenty of midrange that Dumbles are well known for. Again I couldn’t help but marvel at the clarity across the strings even at higher gain settings – open notes ring out beautifully without ever feeling like they’re overpowering everything else when you play arpeggiated chords, and it never sounds like it’s getting overwhelmed.

Bluesy licks are the unsalted butter and brown sugar of the Enigmatic, delivering superb touch dynamics that are every bit as tasty as its colorway implied to me earlier on. The tone just begs for pentatonic licks, groovy riffs, and bends aplenty. Here, the ‘room’ knob really comes into its own, giving a real 3D sense of space to your playing with a gorgeous slapback reverb effect. It kept me playing for a long, long time.

Although you’re unlikely to be purchasing one of these for the clean channel, switching back to integrate it with my pedalboard, I discovered it takes stompboxes really well too. Smashing the front end with my nearly fuzz pedal delivered some grin-inducing moments, and it responded equally well to overdrive and distortion boxes. Combining the overdriven amp sound and pushing it over the edge with a stompbox also worked really well, delivering some super-saturated tones perfect for searing lead licks. Annoyingly though, there is a slight delay when channel switching that



GUITAR WORLD VERDICT



Dumble tone veneration aside, the UA Enigmatic is a superb amp simulator that delivers creamy overdriven tones alongside a brilliant clean channel that takes pedals well. It’s much more than just a vehicle for blues licks too, giving plenty of versatility for a variety of playing styles.

PROS

- + Deliciously smooth overdrive sounds
- + Surprisingly good clean channel
- + Versatile tone shaping
- + Easy to dial in a variety of sounds

CONS

- UAFX Control app wouldn’t work on my Android phone
- Slight delay when channel switching
- Could be too specialist for some

SPECS

TYPE: Amp emulator pedal
CONTROLS: Volume/room, overdrive/ratio, output, bass/deep/mid, middle/presence, treble/bright, cab switch, mode switch, tone switch, on/off footswitch, preset footswitch
FEATURES: Two channels, 3 speaker/mic models (6 more in-app), UAFX control mobile app
CONNECTIVITY: 2 x 1/4” TS inputs, 2 x 1/4” TS outputs, 1x USB-C
BYPASS: Buffered
POWER: 9V DC, 400mA
DIMENSIONS: 92 x 65 x 150mm
WEIGHT: 0.56kg

might put you off using it like a two-channel amp. One of the best things about the Enigmatic is how well all the controls respond to your input. It makes it a lot more versatile than you’d expect, so even though a lot of blues lovers might be looking at this stompbox, don’t be put off if you’re not an SRV or John Mayer fan. It can cover a lot more sonic ground than you might expect, and I found it just as good for hard rock riffs and odd-time prog rock as it is for blues schmooze.

Verdict

Despite being considered one of the more esoteric amps out there, UA’s version delivers a surprisingly versatile offering with the Enigmatic. It doesn’t sound like any of your standard amp models and it’s a unique offering in a day and age where iconic amp models are the norm rather than something novel.

It’s super easy to use, although I was slightly disappointed by the app not working with my Pixel smartphone. It would’ve been nice to be able to try out the custom tone stack options and see what other cab models were available. I hope UA can get this fixed at some point in the future, as a brief search revealed that a lot of other guitarists have the same issue.

