

# all on BOARD

To stand out in an oversaturated industry, pedal manufacturers cater to old trends with new technology

By Alex Harrell

The 2017 Winter NAMM Show featured more than 200 pedal-related companies; at least 30 of which were showcasing for the first time. And while that seems like a lot of businesses, it's a small fraction of what's being bought and sold online. Dan Orkin, Reverb.com's director of content, estimated that roughly 600 different pedal brands are being actively bought and sold on the website, including new, used and vintage pedals.



"There is more competition than ever," said Mike Matthews, father of Electro-Harmonix — arguably one of the more successful pedal manufacturers in the industry. "When I first started in 1968, there were only a handful of companies doing what we did."

But despite being in the total pinnacle of pedal popularity, the trend that's dominating the industry has remained the same for several years now.

### SAVING SPACE

"For a while, people were talking about mini pedals being the hot trend, but I don't hear as much about that [now]," said Reverb's Orkin. "It was more of a novelty, I think."

Which is true, to an extent. Pedal makers have transformed the bite-sized pedal trend from simply that — a trend — into an opportunity to address a heavy burden that's been weighing down musicians and, as a result, manufacturers.

"Everyone is flying into gigs nowadays, which has become a

lot more popular because then people can still have a life," joked Tommy Norton, national sales manager at Framus Warwick USA. But he's right: Musicians are increasingly choosing the sky over the road to get from show to show.

"With fly-away gigs, guys are literally bringing [just] their pedalboard and a guitar with them on a plane so they fit in the overhead bin, so they're bringing less stuff," Norton said.

Framus Warwick's Flat Patch Cables save space on pedalboards and were the company's biggest hit at The 2017 NAMM Show.

"Normally, you'd use patch cables that have a bulbous end. When you put them side by side, it takes up about an inch and a half in between your pedals," Norton said.

But with the Flat Patch Cables, users can get them side by side; a three-pedal pedalboard can fit a fourth pedal.

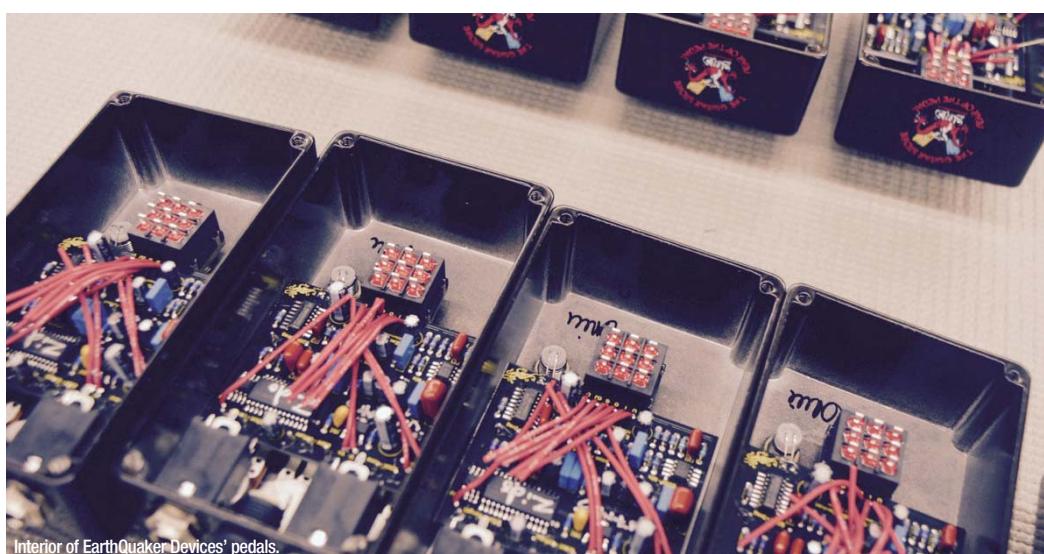
And according to Peter Janis, CEO of Radial Engineering, the cause of the size issue is that musicians are using pedalboards,





**"The pedal industry in the past five to 10 years resembles the microbrewery industry. There are hundreds of new brands and few established mentors."**

- Jeff Slingluff, BOSS/Roland U.S. guitar product manager



specifically, as a means to handle fly-in gigs.

"With more and more artists traveling, size has become an issue," Janis said. As a result, Radial downsized most of its Tonebone distortion pedals to better fit on a pedalboard and has made all the pedals 9-volts for easy integration with external power bricks.

James Brown, co-owner of Amptweaker, agreed.

"The initial response was to make tiny, single pedals, but it's since transformed into multi-use pedals that are more normalized," Brown said. "Our Pro Series pedals were a response to this pedalboard size issue, although maybe not obvious at first since they're a bit bigger than a lot of 'normal-sized' pedals."

The TightMetal Pro — designed with feedback from Misery Index guitarist Mark Kloepfel — is Amptweaker's best-selling pedal. The single pedal has both heavy rhythm and lead capabilities, a three-band equalizer for tweaking, and a built-in noise gate.

"Metal guys [can] show up with their guitar and this one pedal and know that they'd be able to dial in their tone easily, no matter what amps they'd find at the gig," he said.

Amps can be a huge source of anxiety for artists; they'll eat up all the allotted weight for a checked suitcase, and they definitely won't fit in the overhead compartments.

So, can guitar players get their coveted amp tones through a pedal — without the need for an actual amp?

Seymour Duncan said yes, you can, and addressed this concern with its Palladium Gain Stage pedal.

"It's the first true amp replacement, and it's changing the way guitar players think about using a pedal as the centerpiece of their rig," said Max Gutnik,

Seymour Duncan's chief revenue officer and senior vice president of new products.

Once Seymour Duncan got the Palladium down, the company took the next step to creating a portable pedal rig. So it released the PowerStage 170 — a compact, 170-watt power amp that lives on the pedalboard.

The company boasts the combination of the Palladium and PowerStage as ideal for guitarists who don't want to lug around heavy equipment.

"I think the more you can do with less space, the better," Gutnik said. "There's no question that in a lot of cases smaller is better, but only to the point of which it's not too small to be functional and easy to use."

But Kevin Boilembach, president of Godlyke, had

some concerns regarding the miniaturization of pedals and pedal accessories.

"This trend has been going on for a few years, and I can't help but wonder if the influx of larger companies into this segment of the market actually means that this trend has peaked and is on its way out," he said. "In my experience, the big boys have a tendency to watch the boutique market and then copy what seems to be doing well — sometimes too late!"

And Roger Smith, president of Source Audio, had a similar mindset.

"That trend has happened, and it continues to happen, but it's an area of the market where we are not playing," he said. So instead, Source Audio is focusing its attention on something else.



Seymour Duncan's Steven Casado

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## DIVING DEEPER INTO THE DIGITAL WORLD

"First and foremost, the quality of digital effects is entering into a new realm," Source Audio's Smith said. While the first wave of digital pedals started around 15 years ago, the second wave started swelling in the past three years.

"There's this whole new level of acceptance that digital distortion is with us to stay, and it's opening a lot of doors when you can start to do things in the digital domain," he said.

Behind one of those doors is the capability of pedals to talk to each other and operate in a smart pedalboard environment. Historically, pedalboards could only send one-way messages to the pedal. But now with Source Audio's 5 One Series and Soundblox 2 pedals, it's possible to create a dialogue between the controller and the pedals — to the point where pedalboards can save and store various sound creations.

"It's an amazing thing that happens once you are in the digital world," Smith said.

A surprising result of the digital direction that the industry has been taking was consumers' desire to use these updated technologies to create vintage sounds.

"This vintage shift has also been happening with pedals as few larger pedal designs are emerging, bucking the mini pedal trend of the past few years," said Tony Motta, Voodoo Lab's vice president of global sales and marketing.

Motta also noted the growing popularity of the use of digital control over analog signal in a pedal format; Walrus Audio released the 385 Overdrive pedal in response to this trend.

"A lot of our artists started using the audio sections of vintage projectors and plugging their guitars into them and using that as an amp," said Colt Westbrook, president of Walrus Audio. "It's got this unique, gorgeous sound that we knew we needed to put in an amp and what came out [of it] was kind of like an amp-in-a-box."

And manufacturers are taking note of — and applauding — what competitors are producing.

"I was just looking online at EHX pedals, and they have a new pedal that makes your guitar sound like a vintage synthesizer," said Brian Ball, president of Ernie Ball. "I think the impact of pedals has



Source Audio's Roger Smith

been very big on the pendulum swinging the electric guitar back into popularity again."

Keeping in line with Ball's metaphor, the pendulum has swung severely and stuck in its tracks. Retailers aren't

necessarily complaining.

"People like to buy and sell effects; they're cheap enough," Sammy Ash, COO of Sam Ash Music, put plainly. Sam Ash's used effects business is "monstrous" because people like to swap their pedals in for something else — like trading cards, he said.

Gear junkies aren't upgrading their effects, but experimenting with the plethora of different sounds available.

"It's great for the retailer because it brings people into your store quite often," Ash said. "It has become its own industry, and I don't see it slowing down anytime soon. [But] it's getting a little crowded."

Pedal manufacturers aren't

complaining either, though some are worried.

"Being in the industry, I hate to say it's oversaturated," said Norton of Framus Warwick USA. "But in reality, it is."

This has even led some boutique companies to, ironically enough, pioneer the trend of *not* following what's en vogue.

"I try not to respond to pedal-type trends; I look at the long-term and don't want to offer some pedal which falls out of favor in a few years," said Analogman's founder, Mike Piera.

"I go back and forth, personally, between paying attention to what's happening in the industry and not paying attention," said Jamie Stillman,

president of EarthQuaker Devices.

This tactic seems to be working quite well for his company, considering Reverb ranked it as 2016's No. 1 boutique pedal maker.

"I'm not trying to break our machine; it's panned out so far for me not to pay any attention," he laughed.

In spite of the literal thousands of pedal options that players have and the presumably high turnover rate of independent pedal-makers, the industry is, quite simply, thriving.

"It has probably never been as diverse as it is now, and there have never been as many options as there are now," Stillman said. "And there are players out there for all those options." MI

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