

Detailed Review of the
Celestial Effects
Aries Beast Distortion Pedal
By
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In my opinion a distortion pedal is a difficult effect to design. There are plenty of examples in the market that exemplify this difficulty. The general tendency is to go for more of one thing and then miss the mark completely on what makes a good distortion pedal, well... good. Designers add too much gain, too much bass, too much compression, and then miss out the number one thing that can make or break a drive pedal usable, namely the EQ. Oh, and of course, the "Amp in a Box" craze that is still ongoing (admittedly, I wasted time and money on this only to arrive at the obvious conclusion). Perhaps it's because pedal builders have spent so much time trying to nail a good variation of a TS that they forgot that high gain is a good thing. This long-winded preamble highlights my frustrations with high gain pedals, however thanks to efforts of Dom Mancini, the tone alchemist behind Celestial Effects, these frustrations are over. Ladies and gents, the Aries Beast Distortion is the one pedal to rule them all. This is the easiest review I have ever written, because the Aries is just that good.

It's true, and if you don't believe me that is your loss. I have been test-driving the Aries distortion prototype for a few months now and it slays every other high gain pedal in the market for several reasons. First is the obvious quality of construction of the pedal. The guys at Celestial are bonafide engineers who specialize in circuit design and build. This industrious background is obvious on the careful layout of components, choice of components, and quality of the build. Even though my pedal is a prototype, I fully trust it to endure the rigors of gigging. I have seen the final layout of the finished product and true to form the pedal will look super cool and follow the zodiac-inspired visual styling. Style is important. Second reason is the fact that no expense is spared in the build, yet the Aries will come to you at a price point that will not break the bank, thanks to the factory-direct approach from the guys at Celestial. Smart.

Ok, lets talk about tone. The first fantastic thing one should take note is that the Aries Beast Distortion has a 3 band EQ. Yes, you read it correctly; you will find bass, mid, and treble knobs. Each band of the EQ is very usable allowing the player to tailor the tone according to the rest of the rig. FINALLY a great sounding distortion that is able to adapt to a variety of guitars and amps. My tests, which actually included 100% real playtime with a band and recording, used three different amps, a Budda combo, and two amps from the Firebird Musical Amplifier line (a Trainwreck Express inspired amp, and another original design with a definite nod to British tones). Guitars were a LP, a G&L Legacy, and a couple of Firebirds, including a 1964 Firebird III. No matter which guitar and their natural tonal characteristics, I

was able to tweak just the right amount of EQ to sit in the mix and when appropriate, cut through the mix. I can add enough bottom end with the bass knob to beef up thin sounding guitars, add sparkle to the top end with the treble, and adjust the vocal quality of the guitar with the mid EQ. Smart.

Now, for the heart of the Aries: The drive and gain knobs. Each knob adjusts a discrete gain stage and they are VERY different from one another. The drive knob has more drive on tap than the gain knob. Turning the drive all the way down, the gain adjustment can add some dirt to the sound going from a boost/overdrive type of gain structure, all the way to what feels like a good cranked low gain EL84 type of tone. Now I don't know why one would buy a distortion pedal to use as a boost, but you have that option. Keeping the gain knob all the way down and only using the drive knob, you will find a very nice grind that is not over the top. Think Brian May levels of drive.

The real fun, of course, is adjusting and blending the two knobs to explore the tonal and drive characteristics of the pedal. Of course the Aries has a volume knob also and that can easily adjust the level of the pedal, boosting or cutting volume accordingly, since increasing the drive and gain knobs will add volume. The knobs are fully interactive, and as expected adding more drive or gain also exaggerates certain frequencies which can then be compensated up or down accordingly with the EQ. The overall vibe of the pedal is quite woody, with a nice grind that remains articulate across the gain spectrum. Depending on the choice of guitar and amp, you can go from classic rock (think Rock Candy from Montrose) to shredding tones (think Steve Morse, George Lynch) and anywhere in between. One very interesting highlight: the Aries actually sounds good at low gain settings! Now that is really unusual for a distortion pedal, which generally has to be set past noon on the typical gain spectrum, otherwise it will sound thin and anemic. This is NOT the case with the Aries. Last but certainly not least, the Aries has the ability of being an "always ON" pedal. It is extremely responsive to playing dynamics, and to the volume knob of the guitar. You can make it purr or make it growl, and growl it does, solely by using the volume knob of the guitar. I suspect this has a lot to do with the fact that the Aries has stacked gain stages under the hood, much like amplifiers do. To answer the obvious question: Yes, the Aries stacks well with other drives, boosts, and time/pitch based effects. Smart.

I am not going to bore you with details about the circuit, mostly because that is best left to the designers and builders. The guys at Celestial are friendly and love to talk shop, so if the Aries webpage does not answer your questions, write them and usually within 24 hours you get an answer. The Aries Beast Distortion is an excellent, no nonsense, and versatile tone tool. It is a simple pedal that delivers layers of possibilities in an easy to adjust and use format. Simply put, the Aries is a pedal for all musical situations. Smart.