

ROBERT KEELEY MODDED TUBE SCREAMERS

WHEN IS A REISSUE NOT A REISSUE? WELL, WHEN IT'S A REISSUE. EH? **MICK TAYLOR** SEPARATES THE WOOD FROM THE TUBE SCREAMER TREES WITH THE HELP OF KEELEY ELECTRONICS

You hear the term Ibanez Tube Screamer uttered frequently by guitar players, most of whom do so with misty-eyed reverence about some sacrosanct sound.

However, saying 'Tube Screamer' is about as descriptive as saying 'Fender Twin', in that they've varied a great deal over the years. So let's get it cleared up: what most guitar players are looking for in their Tube Screamer, is an original-spec TS-808 which featured the fabled JRC4558 chip,

GBOPINION

KEELEY MODDED TUBE SCREAMERS

GOLD STARS

- ★ Tone
- ★ Tone
- ★ Did we say tone?

BLACK MARKS

- Nothing, not even the price!

GBRATING

★★★★★

which is generally agreed to be the essential ingredient, whether in Japanese (JRC4558D) or Malaysian (Texas Instruments RC4558P) variants. Indeed, Ibanez has recently reissued both TS-808 and TS 9 variants with the 'right' chip – see *GB* issue 43. There's more to it than that, though, says the man behind the pedals you see before you. According to highly revered effects pedal tweaker Robert Keeley, even the Holy Grail benefits from a few more mods.

MAN'S MAIN MODS

So here we have Keeley's take on what the Ibanez Tube Screamer should be. He takes brand-new TS-808s and TS 9s (or your own old one), then replaces various components to make them 'even better' than the original pedals.

That fabled JRC4558D chip? Well, here's a surprise. Robert Keeley has 'vintage' 1982 JRCs if you want them – he's mounted the chip in an interchangeable socket if you want to make the swap yourself – but the reissue 4558Ds as fitted to new Ibanez pedals? "Those go in the garbage," he says, for the TS 9-808 at least, replaced with the Texas Instruments RC4558P because, according to Keeley, "this chip provides the best sound quality available", even if trying to be objective about which of two similar chips sound better, is a bit like splitting hairs at a hair splitting contest, for most folk. Like me, though, you may be surprised, as we'll find out in a bit.

There's plenty more that happens in a Keeley modification. Significantly that the output resistors are replaced with metal film-types which don't introduce noise in the way carbon comp resistors can, plus improvements to the bypass mode which means a purer tone when the pedal is switched off. As 'standard', neither Keeley-modded TS has true bypass circuitry because Keeley is happy with the FET

switch already installed, albeit with a little tweak, as mentioned.

If you really want your Tube Screamer true bypass, it'll cost you another £40, but unless you have a whole board full of true bypass effects and care deeply about all that purist stuff, its value is questionable. After all, most of us use 'ordinary' stompboxes in-between 30-foot or more of cable, plus a bunch of patch leads – hardly an environment for the highest of high fidelity.

In fact, a lot of players necessarily factor the non-true bypass tone into their settings anyway.

And the blue LED? It's extremely bright, and lets everybody know these aren't just any old Tube Screamer.

TWO TO TWANGO

The TS-808 was the first Ibanez Tube Screamer, introduced in the late 1970s, and one thing for which most TSes are criticised is the bass response; in general they are very middly sounding drives. Both the TS-808+ and TS 9-808 are modded for fuller bottom end by changing a couple of capacitors, including that of the tone control. Also, there are resistor changes that alter the gain ranges, meaning they can do cleaner, and more dirty sounds than the originals at respective ends of the drive pots' travel. Keeley calls this the More/Less mod, which, coupled with the improved bottom end, ends up in a more natural-sounding tone, particularly at low-gain settings – great for pushing a Fender-type tube amp, for example. At the other end, Keeley claims up to twice the gain of a standard TS 9, with all the original 808 sounds available in the middle of its range.

Traditionally, the TS 9 is thought of as being clearer and brighter-sounding because it often came with a different chip, whereas the TS-808 was warmer sounding. Indeed, many TS 9 owners had their pedals modded to 808 spec,



■ Blue LED, sir? Just so everybody knows what it is...

which is how we got here in the first place...

A/Bing the Keeley-modded Tube Screamer side by side into the same amp throws up some general similarities and differences. Immediately impressive from both pedals is the fuller, more balanced tone than you might expect

great 808s (and 808-modded TS 9s) gains credence.

It's at this point, following a few gigs with both pedals and listening to them intently, that I became confused. The circuit is the same, the mods are the same, so how come they sound different? A few turns of the screwdriver reveals what may be



■ Love chips? Left is the 808+, right the TS 9-808



from a standard model. It's possible to set both pedals up for a great clean boost with the drives set low and the levels high. There's a surprising combination of punch and clarity to retain excellent note definition, particularly with the TS 9-808 which sounds somewhat more defined, with extra presence.

As you wind on the gain, the openness in chords remains, albeit with a beautifully smooth rounding off to the edges and cutting kick in the mids. Armed with my own Keeley Compressor, an American Vintage '62 Strat and the Victoria Regal reviewed on page 82, this is the best Stevie Ray-type blues tone I've ever managed to muster. Clarity, fatness, sustain: oh yes.

Running the gain near maximum and with the tone control set relatively low really puts your guitar in super-fat territory – no more moaning about under-powered single coils here. The general furore surrounding

the answer. It turns out that the 808+ in fact has the JRC4558D chip, while the TS 9-808 has the RC4558P. I have to admit to being previously a little cynical about all the chip tech talk, but this is proof positive that they really do make a significant difference.

CONCLUSION

It's easy to get a little blasé with so many Tube Screamer 808-derived distortion boxes on the market. The good news is that Robert Keeley's pedals restore the faith simply because they sound so good.

Of the two, we'd recommend the JRC4558D-loaded TS-808+ to anyone wanting that rich mid boost a la Stevie Ray, particularly if you're always thinking your Fender Blues Deluxe/Deville, for example, is a little too bright sounding. If you want more presence – it is a marginal difference, it must be said – but the same overall tone, the RC4558P-loaded TS 9-808

GBINFO

ROBERT KEELEY MODDED TUBE SCREAMERS

PRICE: KEELEY TS-9-808 £139
KEELEY TS-808+ £169

BUILT IN: USA

FEATURES: Ibanez reissue TS-808 and TS 9 pedals with electronic modifications. Drive, tone and level controls, blue LED

POWER: 9-volt battery, or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)

OPTIONS: TS-808-TB (true bypass) £209. TS 9ex (extreme model with more distortion, £149)

CONTACT: Keeley Electronics Europe
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WEB: www.robertkeeley.co.uk

HOW DO I GET ONE?

WHERE TO BUY, WARRANTY, ETC...

■ You can buy your Robert Keeley-modded stompbox from Keeley's UK representatives at Moonphase Ltd. Orders can be placed via post, fax or phone, full details of which you can find at www.robertkeeley.co.uk or by calling 01629 825087.

There's a no-quibble 10-day money back policy should you not be happy in any way with your purchase, as long as the pedal is unmarked in its original packaging. In addition to that, you also have a two-year guarantee against defects in workmanship or materials.

comes equally highly recommended. Robert Keeley's modifications mark a significant tonal improvement over standard-issue pedals, specifically in terms of putting back the bottom end – but no mud – and particularly when partnered with quality guitars and amps. Definitely not a modern rock/metal pedal, just full, smooth drive, exactly as it should be for classic rock and blues: lovely. **GB**

