

EARTHQUAKER DEVICES SPACE SPIRAL REVIEW

By Charles Saufley

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Our days of stompbox bounty have had an interesting—in some ways polarizing—effect on the state of delay. At the “analog” extreme, bucket brigade delays and powerful digital processors generate and painstakingly emulate the sounds of tape, drum, and other analog echoes. At the other end, digital processing makes delay and reverb more boundless, inorganic, and galactic-scale than ever.

Somewhere between those two points on the echo spectrum lives good old digital mid-fi. And with '80s musical textures more en vogue now than at any time since Alf was a media titan, musicians and manufacturers are re-discovering the charms of echoes from digital's infancy. Not surprisingly, EarthQuaker Devices—who have never found a weird or underutilized sound they could not turn to magic dust—have taken the voice of early digital delay and enhanced it with modulation features that make the dirtier side of digital seem downright intoxicating. But the coolest thing about the Space Spiral is the wealth of tones that exist outside of stylistic or period constraints. There are a lot of very unique sounds on tap.

Inside the Flux Capacitor

Though the Space Spiral is an original circuit, you can spy a few possible inspirations in the control layout and functionality—most notably Ibanez's mid-'80s DML series, which used LFO-driven modulation to tweak digital repeats. But where the Ibanez was designed to deliver literal (if sometimes intense) chorus and flange-style modulation, the range and interactivity of the Space Spiral's controls make it easy to generate sounds well outside the '80s tone canon.

The controls themselves are simple to understand, even if their range and sensitivity take some

getting used to. The delay controls are a standard time, rate, and mix array, although the latter is especially sensitive and does not include a 100 percent wet setting. The modulation section is simple and mostly self-explanatory: Depth and rate control the intensity and speed of the modulations, while the shape control alters waveforms from triangle- to square-wave profiles as you move through its range.

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Peek inside the enclosure reveals a few surprises. The low sample rate and processing power means the Space Spiral will actually run on a 9V battery (although we cannot vouch for battery life), and there is ample room for a battery thanks to a surprisingly compact circuit board. The pedal also runs on 9V AC power.

Dusky Digital Duplication

Dialing out Space Spiral's modulation and focusing exclusively on repeats reminds you how pleasant and effective a simple digital delay can be. Though EQD has made much of the "darkness" in these repeats, I heard a really nicely contoured top end that, in many ways, suggests bucket brigade shadowiness with a little extra definition in the repeats. It's sure to mark a nice compromise for players that shun digital's antiseptic side, but like an echo that stays present in a mix. And the very slight grit in the repeats is almost always a pleasing (and nearly analog-like) additional texture.

The delay only ranges to 660 ms, though I almost never missed the additional delay length and there's enough for evocative yodeling-in-the-Alps-style echoes, which can create a very disorienting wash at long repeat settings.

Mods on Target

Although digital delay artifacts or sterility aren't an issue with the Space Spiral, small amounts of modulation lend an organic, nebulous shading to the repeats. I particularly loved this effect when delay times were short and repeats were long, which creates an irregular and very active airplane hangar-like ambience—even in small rooms and with small amps.

Fast modulation rates and deep depth settings mated to fast and long repeats sounded, at times, like an army of Lilliputians crying out in distress from behind my amp. Slower modulation times, meanwhile, have the uneasy queasiness of Echoplex tape at the precipice of its demise. Unexpected textures reward unorthodox control settings.

For instance, aggressive depth, mix, and time settings blended with short repeats and languid modulation rates to yield almost B-bender like pitch shifts. Meanwhile, mellow-but-present depth settings, fast modulation rates, and longer time and repeat settings created multi-dimensional, wobbling tones somewhere between a Tel-Ray oil can delay and a Fender Vibratone whirring away in a cavernous cargo hold. Short-to-slap back delay times also are effective with more demented modulation settings—almost like playing warped Sun or Stax vinyl while jiggling a vari-speed turntable control.

Probing the many texture combinations available would be a lot less satisfying were it not for the sensitivity of Space Spiral's controls. This is a thoughtfully and well-tuned control set that seems to exponentially enhance the unit's potential. The range of the mix control is

especially wide. And while some players may lament the inability to create all-wet delay signals, the pinpoint degree to which you can duck or foreground a given delay/modulation combination is impressive and very useful when exploring more alien tones.

The Verdict

It's funny—much of EarthQuaker's Space Spiral marketing copy seems designed to set up the expectation of ugly, primitive, lo-fi digital sounds. But while Space Spiral will never rip you off when it comes to unabashed weirdness, I found it capable of very lush, immersive, and airy delay tones that strike a nice balance between analog duskiness and digital presence, especially if used with just a trace of the available modulation. The controls are beautifully sensitive and interactive, creating a palette of textures you might associate with a more complex and processor-potent digital unit.

If there is a complaint to be levied against the Space Spiral, it's that it's difficult to dial in more conventional chorus- or phase-like modulation sounds. It might also be nice to see a version that permits expression pedal control of these impressive effects. Then again, I doubt I would trade any of the unique delay/modulation recipes I extracted from the Space Spiral for more pedestrian delay/chorus tones that I can get just about anywhere. Like so many EQD pedals, Space Spiral is about the tone paths less taken—and the discoveries that come with being led astray.

Ratings

Pros:

Surprisingly rich and colorful delay sounds. Unique modulated delay textures. Excellent range in controls.

Cons:

Some players may miss 100 percent wet delay option.

Tones:



Ease of Use:



Build/Design:



Value:



Street:

\$195

EarthQuaker Devices Space Spiral

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