

KEELEY ELECTRONICS

KATANA BLUES DRIVE

REVIEW BY **FLETCHER STEWART**

STREET PRICE **\$199.00**



THE ANEMIC TONE ASSASSIN

Gazing into the glowing blue electric eye of the Katana Blues Drive is like having a staring contest with a focused tonal master. Robert Keeley's vision of the perfect boost pedal has begotten an overdrive so transparent and dynamic, one might think of this new baby blue box as an extension of the amplifier.

The sonic DNA from the original Katana Boost is clear and strong with the Katana Blues Drive. Cascading JFET stages blend in and infiltrate any

tube preamp, with the seamless circumspect of an assassin. With the tone controls set to noon and the drive set low, one can push a preamp session subtly harder, freeing hostage harmonics with nuanced pick attacks. While this scenario may sound familiar to the elite cult of Katana Clean Boost wielders of yore, the bite of this new blade cuts much deeper into the realm of overdrive.

Even the most sterile, lifeless and cold clean tone will blossom like a flower of complex gain structure as the warm drive is dialed

in. The drive control adds an ever-so-slight midrange boost as it is turned up, but never gets stopped up with the congested nasal whine of a stock TS-type circuit. The drive remains dynamic and touch-sensitive all the way up the dial, thanks to Keeley's trademark exclusion of clipping diodes. Though it is specific to the amp to a point, cranked gain stages of the Katana Blues Drive remind me of a JTM 45 run to the hilt—which is a welcome, serendipitous slice of sonic life.

BOOST OR CUT WITH NINJA PRECISION

The active Bass and Treble controls in this nuanced circuit act as fine-tuning mechanisms; they can be used in any number of utilitarian ways. If I want to add some sparkle and slice to a humbucker-equipped guitar, I simply edge up the Treble to around 2 'o clock.

If I want to add some fortitude to a famished tinny pickup, and cut the spikes off the high end, I simply bump the Bass and cut the Treble. These descriptions may sound obvious, but it is surprising how difficult it can be to hit a sweet spot with some overdrive circuits. Keeley's many years of stock pedal modification no doubt provided a robust foundation to build this wholly usable tonestack on top of. Even the extreme boost or cut settings remain in the good tone zone—unlike many active tone stacks.

One cool setting I found was with the Gain and Bass controls wound right up, I could mimic the fat, fuzzy overdrive of my trusty Crowther Hot Cake. I imagine bass players will also enjoy this vastly versatile pedal when they want to add some grunt and grind to the mix.

WHAT WE LIKE

It is hard to imagine a scenario where this adaptable, toneful tool wouldn't come in handy. Leaving the level above 10 'o clock, I could randomly turn the dials, step on the true bypass switch and get a usable tone every time. The build quality can't be faulted on any level and remains top-tier, right down to the polished metal knobs.

CONCERNS

For those that think Robert Keeley is old hat or surpassed by the legions of newer pedal builders out there, this blue-eyed killer might just incise all preconceptions. Though it

seems pricey, this is an original design from the Modfather of boutique tone. The Katana Blues Drive reflects years of feedback, research and trend setting tone sculpting. It is indeed, a cut above the rest.