

Rush Pep Box

David Toop

In the early 1970s I acquired two distortion pedals. One of them—a gray box with no marked brand name—produced the kind of smooth, sustained and regular fuzz tone typical of Neil Young’s recordings of the period. The other was far more unusual in every respect. The construction was sturdy: It was a rectangular metal box (32 cm long, 8.7 cm wide, 4 cm deep), painted red and covered with a slightly larger black wooden top surfaced with black corrugated rubber; the control knobs were recessed into the top, one being for volume, the other for a more mysterious variable termed pep. The name of the box and its manufacturer were clearly marked in silver: “Rush Pep Box, WEM, Watkins London England” (Fig. 1). Along with the strange name, the pep control and the utilitarian design, an additional quirk was the absence of an output socket. Instead of the customary input and output socket, which allowed the player to choose the length of cables connecting guitar, pedal and amplifier, the pedal was fit-

ted with its own output cable, so limiting the distance from the amp at which the pedal could be set up.

The most eccentric aspect of this guitar effect, however, was its sound.

With the pep control set to its maximum output of 8, the effect was piercing, violent and lacking in sustain. Fitting the pedal with a new 9V battery opened other possibilities: the distortion could be transformed easily into a sharp click or a low pop, and passing a metal object close to the guitar pickup produced either a harsh crackle or what can best be described as tearing sounds.

At that time I was performing

ABSTRACT

The author relates his experiences, going back 3 decades, with the WEM Rush Pep Box, as well as the origin of the device.

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Fig. 1. WEM Rush Pep Box, 2007. (Photo © Eileen Peters)



with drummer Paul Burwell in an improvising duo called Rain in the Face [1]. The Rush Pep Box was used in two distinct ways. The clicks, pops and crackles of the pedal were the basis for pieces that explored short percussive sounds. These were given names such as “Barbastella Barbastellus,” a reference to the echolocation clicks emitted during hunting by the Barbastelle bat, and “Barra Da Tijuca F.S. Flies Towards Ocean At Tremendous Speed,” a title pulled from a photo credit in George Adamski’s book *Flying Saucers Have Landed*. One of the attractions of the obviously faked photographs in Adamski’s books was the resemblance of the flying saucers to car hubcaps used by Paul Burwell as part of his percussion kit [2].

Another characteristic of the pedal, exploited in pieces such as “Cloud Studies N. 2,” recorded for our first BBC Radio Three broadcast in 1973, was its destructive interaction with other effects pedals [3]. If it were used in combination with my second fuzz box, for example, the additive sound would be a cancelled sustain. In other words, the normal decay time of the more conventional pedal would begin as usual, but then fade away into a complex, spluttering distortion or disappear abruptly. In this configuration my guitar (at that time a Fender Esquire) could sound not unlike the hybrid electronic keyboard sounds popular from the early 1960s until the mid-1970s, such as the Rocksichord, Clavinet and Clavioline. One influence on our music came from Sun Ra, and since Sun Ra had made records with these and other electronic keyboards, this increased the attraction of the effect [4].

These distinct peculiarities can be heard in the three sections of sound poet Bob Cobbing’s *Judith Poem*, performed by the abAna trio of Cobbing, Burwell and myself in 1973. For the first two sections, which were fast and agitated, I used the Rush Pep Box alone, then added the second fuzz box for the slower third section, activating the guitar by dragging a piece of rough timber across the strings [5].

The Rush Pep Box came to be my secret weapon in every musical situation of subsequent years. In *Alterations*, the multi-instrumental improvising quartet that comprised Peter Cusack, Steve Beresford, Terry Day and myself, noise frequently battled against lyricism, brutality against subtlety. I had taken to playing my guitar (by this time a Fender Telecaster) with metal plectrums or an iron bar. At high volume and in combination with other pedals, the Rush Pep Box would

generate extremes of distortion and dynamic decay, closer to ripped sheet metal or exploding circuitry than an electric guitar. Chained guitar pedals will always create an unpredictable accumulation of noise, but inserting the Rush Pep Box into a chain could tip this aleatoric accretion over the edge into a force that regularly destroyed the valves in my Fender amplifier [6].

Recording solo albums such as *Pink Noir* (1996) [7] and *Spirit World* (1997) [8], I used the Rush Pep Box for the qualities detailed above, although I applied them to instruments other than guitar, such as computer-sequenced electronic keyboards or amplified flute. The distinctive crackle remained alluring and I used it in combination with Max Eastley’s Violet Ray Vitalator [9] in “Ceremony Viewed Through Iron Slit” and with Michael Prime’s recordings of bats and Robert Hampson’s shortwave radio manipulations in “Aether Talk.”

As a consequence of the spread of the Internet and the increasing scope of search engines, my use of the Rush Pep Box came to the attention of interested parties who would otherwise have been unaware of my musical activities. In 2004 I was contacted via e-mail by Tony Richard, a musician friend of the inventor of the Rush Pep Box. Richard had himself been contacted by two researchers then developing a book about The Beatles and their recording sessions at Abbey Road Studios. They had discovered photographs of John Lennon using a Rush Pep Box during the recording of their 1966 album *Revolver* (perhaps for the distorted guitar drone that underpins “Tomorrow Never Knows”?) and suggested there might be demand for a newly manufactured version of the pedal, given the voracious market for vintage, arcane and extreme stomp boxes.

In 2005 I met the designer, Pepe Rush (hence the name Rush Pep), who had lost all papers documenting his invention in a fire, had little recollection of how he made it and had no pedal to use as reference for an updated model. I was happy to lend him my Rush Pep Box, and also learn the historical background to the device. Born in 1943, Rush lived in Soho, central London, with his musician parents—vocalist Pat Hyde and session musician and band conductor Peter Rush [10]. Inspired at the age of 12 by his grandfather, who built an amplifier using instructions in a book, Pepe Rush began to experiment with electronics. Initially he worked with his mother on the Variety Theatre circuit in Britain, helping her

to install her personal PA system in each theater; by the age of 16 he had opened his own recording studio—Radio Music Recording Studios—in Berwick Street, London. Having bought equipment, designed the mixer and assumed duties as engineer, Rush claims to have recorded many British rock ‘n’ roll, skiffle and jazz acts of the 1950s and early 1960s, including The Shadows, Chas McDevitt, and Johnny Kidd and the Pirates. After designing a 20-channel mixing console for the Palladium Theatre in central London, he was approached by the notorious Magic Alex (Yanni Alexis Mardas) on behalf of The Beatles’ Apple Corps. At that time, Mardas was building a recording studio for The Beatles in the basement of their headquarters in Saville Row and bought Rush’s circuit design for the Palladium mixer. His incompetent adaptation of this and other equipment is now legendary and led to his dismissal from Apple by Beatles manager Allen Klein in 1969.

A more fruitful meeting with Lebanese businessman and discotheque owner Raymond Nash led to the establishment of a factory, enabling Rush’s development of electronic equipment for many musicians, including the commission to build a home studio for The Who’s Pete Townshend. Rush is uncertain about the exact date at which he developed the Rush Pep Box; some point in 1965 seems likely. He claims that the characteristics of the pedal were a consequence of using vintage Germanium transistors, overdriven to the point where there was no more headroom. The original model, manufactured by Rush himself, seems to have been used by a small number of bands, hence its obscurity. The Beatles had two, psychedelic pop act Pinkerton’s Assorted Colours are said to have used one and Rush remembers delivering two to Cecil Sharp House, the English Folk Song and Dance Society, where The Shadows were rehearsing, although no trace of its barely controllable, harsh distortion is discernible on any of their recordings. During a session at Steve Broughton’s north London studio in the 1980s, I discovered that the psychedelic noise of the Edgar Broughton Band, notorious in their time for a hippie chant entitled “Out Demons Out,” was fueled partially by the Rush Pep Box.

Again at an unspecified date, likely, however, to have been in the late 1960s, Rush was approached by Charlie Watkins, co-founder of Watkins Electric Music (WEM), famous for the Watkins Copicat Echo. WEM took over the marketing of

the Rush Pep Box and modified it using silicon transistors. The standard model sold for 12 guineas (£12, 12 shillings), with a bass model priced slightly higher [11]. The deal foundered, however, when a Watkins engineer incorporated the pedal into an amplifier. A dispute over royalties ensued, and Rush lost control of his own invention. Recent plans to redesign and launch a new version of the Rush Pep Box are still in abeyance. Meanwhile, my Rush Pep Box continues to function after 35 years of use, generating material for both digital processing and live group improvisation.

References and Notes

1. Rain in the Face, documented for *Leonardo Music Journal* 11 (2001). See <leonardo.info/lmj/lmj11contribnotes.html>.
2. Coincidentally, the co-author of Adamski's *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953) was the British sci-fi music experimentalist Desmond Leslie, whose "space" recordings of the 1950s have recently been issued on CD for the first time (*Music of the Future*, Trunk JBH014CD [2005]).
3. Jazz in Britain, broadcast BBC Radio Three, 19 May 1973.
4. Examples of Sun Ra's use of electronic keyboards can be heard on *The Magic City*, the two volumes of *My Brother The Wind*, and the second volume of *Helio-centric Worlds*.
5. This performance can be heard on the LMJ11 CD, *Not Necessarily "English Music,"* published with *Leonardo Music Journal* 11 (2001). See also the author's essay, "Sound Body: The Ghost of a Program," *Leonardo Music Journal* 15 (2005) pp. 28–35.
6. An example can be heard on track 8—"Bracknell 3"—of the Alterations CD *Voila Enough!, Alterations 1979–81*, Atavistic UMS/ALP239CD (2002).
7. David Toop, *Pink Noir*, Virgin AMBT18 (1996).
8. David Toop, *Spirit World*, Virgin AMBT22 (1997).
9. The Violet Ray (or Purple Ray) Vitalator was a "quack" therapeutic device popular in the 1930s. It crackled when passed over the skin.
10. All information on Pepe Rush derived from personal communication with the author, 2005–2007.
11. Original advertisement reproduced at Watkins Guitar World web site, <www.watkinsguitars.co.uk/misc.htm>, accessed 2 January 2007.

David Toop is a composer/musician, author and curator. He has written four books, currently translated into nine languages. His first album, New and Rediscovered Musical Instruments, was released in 1975; since 1995 he has released eight solo albums, including Screen Ceremonies, Museum of Fruit and Black Chamber. His latest solo album, Sound Body, was released in 2007. As a critic and columnist he has written for many publications, including The Wire, The Face, The Times, The New York Times and The Village Voice. Exhibitions he has curated include Sonic Boom at the Hayward Gallery, London, and Playing John Cage at Arnolfini, Bristol. In 2005 his sound installation Beijing Water Writing was exhibited in Beijing's Zhongshan Park. He is a Senior Research Fellow at London College of Communication and Visiting Professor at the University of the Arts London.

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