

Hands-on review: Jam Pedals Wahcko+ Wah: one pedal, many wahs

(Brian Johnston | Posted 2011-10-14)



Ah, the wah! Even when not in use, just having it in the toe-down position adds such a beautiful singe and sizzle to one's tone. The wah-wah is one of those indispensable and highly recognizable guitar effects for any rock and blues musician, as it not only heightens the quality and clarity of distortion, but also gives a more throaty, singing voice to the six-string. It does this by sweeping a peak response of a filter up and down in frequency, thus allowing a guitarist to control the shift from a deeper almost drone-like timber to a higher-pitched relief. Once coordinated with the emotional response of the hands the wah literally breathes a different life into what is being played.

Originally the effect was intended to imitate the 'crying' tone of a muted trumpet, but it didn't take long for guitarists and keyboardists to use the tool as a unique way to express music, from a 'wacka-wacka' sound of funk (think the theme from "Shaft") to the soulful weeping of long-sustained notes. The first was created (by accident!) by Brad Plunkett at Warwick Electronics (Thomas Organ Company) in 1966 when the company attempted to develop a new Vox transistor amplifier, and while trying to duplicate an electronics circuit from a tube amp. While fooling around with the problem, with an attached volume pedal and a saxophone, the tone bleated out that classic 'wah' effect. Long story short, the mishap resulted in a cool-sounding pedal that was marketed in 1967 under Clyde McCoy's name – a world-renowned jazz trumpeter who, in the 1920s, was known for his signature 'wah-wah' sound by fluttering a Harmon mute in the bell of his trumpet. Although the pedal was designed originally for use with the organ, it quickly found its place with guitar players.

As stated, the wah pedal produces an altered timbre with the motion of the pedal, but also acts as a boost. The fluctuating timbre creates a distinct frequency space and range among the rest of the band; and because it mimics some sounds of human speech, it cuts very well through the mix and is picked up quite readily by the human ear. As a result of its vocal qualities, the wah adds significantly to the emotional quality of guitar solos. Jimi Hendrix likely is best known as a sound originator with use of the wah, but it has been used extensively by Clapton, Page, Slash, The Edge and many others.

What makes a wah?

Two aspects make a wah pedal desirable. The first and most important is objective, being the quality of the pot involved in the electronics – which becomes obvious with the tonal attributes achieved and longevity of the pedal. The other aspect is more subjective, based on preference – the degree of sweep and throaty characteristics. Some wahs will have a wider range of 'sweep' from a high timbre (toe down) to a low timbre (heel down); some will have a very growly and boisterous

character (an almost ‘honk’); and still others lean more toward a milder weeping sound. Obviously softer music would benefit from a less aggressive wah, whereas edgier music would find a bigger sweep and more throatiness appropriate. And wouldn’t it be nice to have an option of sweep ranges in the same pedal? It certainly would, and I’ll be coming back to this shortly.

Pot & Components When discussing the internal workings of a wah, I’m well aware that the quality of pot is important, as well as the other components, but I won’t pretend to know what to look for if I was set loose in an electronics shop. Used by several professionals, including Bernie Marsden (Whitesnake), Julien Kasper, Elias Zaikos (Blues Wire), and Massimo Varini, **Jam Pedal’s Wahcko+** indicates the following in its literature:

- The best wah-pot in the market
- RED Fasel inductor for pure vintage sound
- internal trimmer which adjusts the input gain
- Carbon Comp resistors and tropical fish capacitors

OK, that sounds good in print, but what about in practice?

I have used a few name-brand wahs, including some big manufacturers and those having a reputation for good wah pedals (including a vintage Jen Crybaby from Italy). However, I can state emphatically that the quality of tone is superior with the Jam Pedals Wahcko+, as it produces a smoother and creamier response. Perhaps it sounds so good because the circuits of this true bypass pedal are modern and yet based on classic 60s and 70s vintage pedals.

Select Your Wah!

What caught my attention, however, is the diversity of the Wahcko+. It includes a six-position dial (with very solid ‘clicks’ to ensure purposeful selection) that allows the player to adjust and control the degree of frequency sweep range, as well as the timber qualities. For example: In position 1, the wah is subtle, although obvious, ideal for players who want that Wah edge without the sweep being extensive or too growly. This position also is ideal for musicians who don’t want to worry about accidental or excessive rocking of the foot if only a subtle wah is all that is required.

In position 6, the wah is so deep it almost sounds bass-like in the heel down position... and with just a bit of toe-down movement you get a great big honking blast as though you’re playing an oversized muted trumpet. Obviously positions 3-4 gives a bit of both worlds and lie somewhere in the middle of the extremes, and positions 2 and 5 give a bit more or less respectively of those opposite ends of the spectrum. Moreover, the other obvious characteristic with the Wahcko+ is when the pedal remains in the toe-down position and among all six positions. There is a sharper delivery in position 1, and a subtle ‘honk’ or throatiness when in position 6 (with variances in the other positions). In effect, you can think of the Wahcko+ as a type of EQ that gives more of a throaty bass response in position 6 and all the way to an edgier bite the more you turn the dial to position 1.

Other Features

There are some other nice features and add-ons to the Wachko+. First, it has an adjustable tension control to determine how tight or loose you want the foot pedal to move, tweaked by an Allen set screw and included wrench. This is convenient and useful since playing just about any instrument is about pressure sensitivity, and that includes movement of the foot and its coordination with the hand. Second, each hand-made pedal comes with a one-of-a-kind psychedelic paint job that makes you think Hendrix or Pink Floyd. With so many people wanting or liking vintage pedals, with boutique builders controlling the helm, why not give it that vibe visually?

Third, it has a mini LED to show its activation, in case you forgot whether it was on or off when in the toe-down position. Oddly enough, not all wah pedals have this simple feature, and as you play and your ears becomes accustomed (desensitized) to your tone, you can forget that it’s on or off, which can make a significant difference as you switch from drive to clean in a song.

Fourth, it uses a regular 9V battery or a 9V adapter, but get this: it uses only 4mA of power when on and less than 0.2mA when off; and so a battery will last hundreds of hours! I'm testing out that theory now as I can't get enough of this pedal!

Fifth, it comes with a limited life-time warranty, which basically is unheard of in the industry, even among boutique pedal builders.

And now for the add-ons: besides coming in a bass version, kick in another 10-15€ for custom paint work... or another 10€ to have the 'seagull effect' added, the same sound used by David Gilmour of Pink Floyd during the recording of Echoes (check the Jam Pedals site (www.jampedlas.com) for this and other sound samples). The seagull effect may have its limitations, but it's so darn freaky that you may be tempted to go the extra.

PLUSES: Usually a wah is something you plug in and use, but the Wahcko+ offers enough diversity and tonal variations that you will be playing around with it like you would a delay or distortion pedal, constantly honing in on unique soundscapes; it's like having multiple wah pedals at your disposal while taking up only one spot on your pedal board; high-quality components and response; adjustable tension control and unique vintage appearance.

MINUSES: More expensive (about \$300 street) than typical name-brand wahs (although the quality in construction and tone is apparent), if you want a basic wah pedal with limited function then the Wahcko+ may be too much. Dealerships in the US are also limited.