

ELECTRO-HARMONIX

CLASSIC BRAND, RELENTLESS INNOVATION
PROPEL "EFFECTS PEDAL RENAISSANCE"



With the Empire State Building in the background, Electro-Harmonix founder/CEO Mike Matthews and newest EHX team member Milena Restrepo at the company's headquarters in New York. — photo by Marc Lesser

By many retailers' accounts, accessory sales have been buoying a near-foundering market. Guitarists, always seeking new and better sounds, may put off big purchases—a new guitar or amp—but many will still spring for a \$100 stomp box. Electro-Harmonix Marketing Director Larry DeMarco reports that EHX is enjoying an "effects pedal renaissance," but he ascribes the company's steady year-over-year sales growth less to macro-economic pressures than to the insatiable sense of adventure and exploration inherent in

the company's culture, and realized in every Electro-Harmonix product.

In recent *Music Trades* surveys top retailers reported that tried-and-true EHX classics such as the Big Muff Pi and Deluxe Memory Man consistently create store traffic. The Big Muff debuted in 1969, and the company still sells thousands of them every year. Meanwhile, Electro-Harmonix continues to break new ground with new effects that surprise the industry and energize the market.

Case in point, the new Ravish Sitar pedal transforms a guitar into a sitar,

simulating that traditional Indian instrument's combination of melody, drone, and sympathetic strings. In addition to three independent level controls for the Dry sound, Lead voice, and Sympathetic strings, there are also individual Timbre controls for the Lead voice and the Sympathetic strings. The Timbre controls introduce more harmonics as they are turned clockwise. The Ravish Sitar enables the player to quickly choose a Sympathetic key by playing a note on his guitar, or select keys and scales for the Sympathetic strings including major, minor, a selection of exotic scales, and a

user-defined custom scale that can be saved to a preset. With an optional expression pedal, the guitarist can control the level of the Sympathetic strings (Drone) or bend the pitch of the Lead voice up from one semitone to a full octave (Pitch).

For those who would pin sitar rock exclusively to the psychedelic '60s, Electro-Harmonix founder and CEO Mike Matthews says the Ravish is proving tremendously popular in 2011 for a variety of reasons: "There's nothing else on the market like it; it's a very interesting sound; and the Beatles and that era's music are timeless." He's also quick to point out that the Ravish is no one-note raga. Beyond its very convincing sitar emulation, it's capable of producing a broad buffet of sounds—from serenely exotic to mind-bending, but—and this is critical—all very *musical*.

While the Ravish Sitar represents a real highlight among EHX's recent product launches, Matthews' team didn't so much as pause to celebrate its release. In addition to the more than 80 active products in the current Electro-Harmonix catalog, the company's six design engineers, all musicians, typically have dozens more at various stages of development, and Matthews promises that something "very big" is just around the corner.

Matthews attributes his talent for developing winning products to his broad and somewhat eccentric résumé, whose highlights include concert producer, entrepreneur ("I've been hustling and selling sh** since I was four or five!"), rock musician, and electrical engineer. And, as any good musician knows, timing is critical. On one hand, he tries to "make sure that the product designs aren't so complex that [the R&D process] goes on and on and the product never makes it to market." On the other hand, he says, "I always give our guys more time than I'd like to [laughs], so they can really think about the designs in depth."

Prototypes are then tested and reviewed by five or six additional musicians on staff. Ultimately Matthews seeks a con-



The new Electro-Harmonix Ravish Sitar's sounds include a convincing emulation of an East Indian sitar.

sensus on proposed products' commercial viability among the designers and other trusted staff musicians. "But *occasionally*," he says, "I'll overrule them."

And his instincts are almost always right, says Media Relations and Special Projects Manager Rick Stevenson. "Mike has a real talent for identifying and hiring the right people for different roles in the company, and his sense for the sounds guitarists want is uncanny."

Two pedals that proved bigger hits than even Matthews anticipated were Stereo Memory Man With Hazarai and the new FREEZE Sound Retainer. The FREEZE delivers real-time sample capture with perfect looping plus infinite sustain of any note at the press of a footswitch. When the footswitch is released, the pedal is ready to sample again. Three selectable decay rates, including a latch mode, guarantee liquid, smooth tonal transitions.

Along with its prolific inventiveness, Electro-Harmonix has a long history of on-target marketing. From its colorful product names and signature graphics to its print advertising, and YouTube demos, EHX's image continues to resonate, perennially young and hip, with today's prime 12- to 24-year-old consumer audience. (No small feat for a company approaching its 44th year.)

Especially in recent years, EHX's marketing flair has extended to clear, logically presented user manuals and highly

engaging YouTube video demonstrations that feature lots of close-ups of control settings used to create particular sounds. The considerable thought and effort invested in making Electro-Harmonix pedals easy to use pays off in two ways: First, it quickly, painlessly avails to even technologically squeamish guitarists the featured product's full spectrum of sounds—and therefore its full fun and value. (This is true for musicians still considering the purchase and those who have already bought the product, the latter a significant boon to customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth.) Second, it helps educate retailers and turn

them into more effective advocates for the EHX line. Electro-Harmonix also promotes guitar community interest in, and loyalty to, the brand through its use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and by hosting user forums on its website.

Matthews notes that in addition to pedal demo videos presented by talented musician/programmers such as Bill Ruppert (web search "Effectology"), EHX posts on its website videos produced by consumers and retailers. It also emails these videos, as well product reviews in magazines, to dealers all over the world both to excite the market and to equip dealers to promote the products themselves.

But in the end, all of the market excitement can be traced back to the products. DeMarco points out that retailers are "benefiting tremendously," from EHX's constant innovation. "Pedals like our FREEZE Sound Retainer and Ravish Sitar are different from everything else on the market," he says, "so there's already a buzz about them on internet forums and blogs. That excitement drives customers into brick-and-mortar music stores and onto e-tailers' websites." He adds that dealers also appreciate the excellent inventory turnover and margins EHX products provide. "It's the best of innovation in both senses: the 'gee whiz' sense that excites consumers, and the practical, commercial sense that puts cash in our dealers' pockets."

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