RADDEST RAT CLONES

The ProCo RAT has always occupied a nebulous sort of gray area on the spectrum of dirt. It can sometimes exhibit the organic, amp-like warmth of a good overdrive, but it's a bit too aggressive and hairy to be boxed in with the Tube Screamer family and its descendants. Some call it a distortion, but the RAT doesn't really have the bottom end crunch and razor sharp attack that defines the modern understanding of that word. It's much more loose and wooly when the gain is cranked. It definitely generates a stellar fuzz tone, but it's a completely different animal than, say, a Big Muff or a Fuzz Face. The RAT occupies a space of its own that encompasses all those things, but without letting itself be pigeonholed into any one category. To use a martial arts analogy, the RAT is the stompbox equivalent of Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do, a "style without style" that clings to no preconceived rules or definitions. Therein lies the power and beauty of the RAT, but it's also that unique, enigmatic character that has likely prevented this pedal from attaining the same lofty status among tone snobs as the pervasive Tube Screamer and Fuzz Face variants. A lot of players probably think it just does one thing, or perhaps, because the RAT does so many things, they're just not sure what to do with it. Who knows? Either way, it's still a legendary, if somewhat cultish and underappreciated, dirt box, and ProCo has been steadily churning out RATs and RAT variants since 1979 at its Kalamazoo, Michigan factory. Of course there are some fine boutique variations on the circuit as well. We are at the height of the boutique pedal boom, after all, and no circuit shall be left un-cloned! Some might question why one would even want a boutique RAT, though, when ProCo has so many great sounding, affordable, U.S.-made RATs in its lineup, but the fact is that some of the smaller companies have done very interesting things with the circuit that are well worth our time and dollars. Some are also hand-building RAT clones that are very faithful to the originals, including the holy LM308 chip that was so crucial to the sound of the early RATs. So let us take a moment and look at some of the more noteworthy RAT-inspired overdrive/distortion/fuzz boxes coming from smaller builders. Here are a handful of my favorites:

MOOER BLACK SECRET

Mooer Audio is a Chinese company that makes a bewildering array of music products. Their most popular line is the extensive Micro Series of itty-bitty effects pedals, of which the Black Secret is a part. The Black Secret is a very convincing sounding RAT clone in a "very small and exquisite" (according to Mooer's website) package. It uses the LM308 chip to deliver the goods, and features a mini-toggle for switching between Vintage mode, which is faithful to the original RAT, and Turbo mode, a much higher gain setting that I assume is based on ProCo's Turbo RAT variant. It has mini level and filter controls and one big knob for gain. Besides being very wee and sounding righteous, the Black Secret is robustly constructed, features true bypass switching, and sells new for 88 simoleans. Buy seven of them and give some to your friends.

JAM Pedals Rattler

The dudes at Greece's JAM Pedals have a reputation for building gorgeous, handmade effects with custom paint jobs and premium, and sometimes rare, components. Their take on the RAT, dubbed the Rattler, doesn't stray far from the vintage RAT design, using an new-old-stock LM308 chip and featuring the standard trio of RAT controls. Where this pedal really stands out is in its amp-like responsiveness and superlative tone, which really nails the fuzzier characteristics of the original RAT circuit. The Rattler doesn't have a bad sound in it, and the gain is addictively thick and creamy. JAM might just have built the best sounding RAT clone there is, but it comes at a price, more specifically a price of 200 American dollars, which seems like kind of a big chunk of change for a very basic pedal, but as I mentioned, it totally rules. Nels Cline uses one!