

Squashing Machine

A Compressor pedal might seem a bit unexciting compared to the usual fuzz boxes and delay pedals, after all it doesn't really do anything, right? Wong, sir. Don't underestimate this humble box. Here's a quick 'n' easy guide to getting best from your compressor.

Snappy, poppy and downright funky: That's how a compressor pedal can change your guitar sound. Compressors started out as one of the earliest studio-based sound processors and are still a very important part of any recording setup. Pedal-based compressors have also earned a place as a treasured part of many guitarists live setup.

So what does a compressor do, then?

Rather than being a discernable 'effect' like a chorus or echo unit, compressors control the dynamic range of your instrument or vocal. Its job is to set a consistent output level by amplifying an incoming signal to a preset threshold.

Why would you want to do that?

OK, imagine your incoming signal slotting into a 'railway track', if you like, which makes sure that quieter passages won't die away too fast, whilst louder passages have a threshold or ceiling to prevent them from being too loud in the band mix. In the studio, compressors are used at the mixing stage to set consistent levels between individual tracks but in terms of guitar FX, compressors are usually employed to add extra sustain by constantly 'bumping' up the signal level.

Pluck your guitar string and the sound gradually dies away as the voltage from the pickups gradually fades, right? A touch of compression helps to maintain sustain. The 'harder' the compression, the more sustain. This can mean a compromise between your natural playing dynamics and the artificial dynamics imposed by the compressor but a small touch of compression will add extra sustain and gain boost to an otherwise lifeless clean sound.

At more extreme levels, a clean guitar that is fairly heavily compressed has a bright punchy sound, more sustain and a crisp attack at the top end, which



is why a lot of country or funk guitarists like to use compression to help add an extra 'kick' from a clean or clean-ish amplifier.

Combined with overdrive, compression's natural sustain enhancement translates into mega sustain and feedback. Great fun!

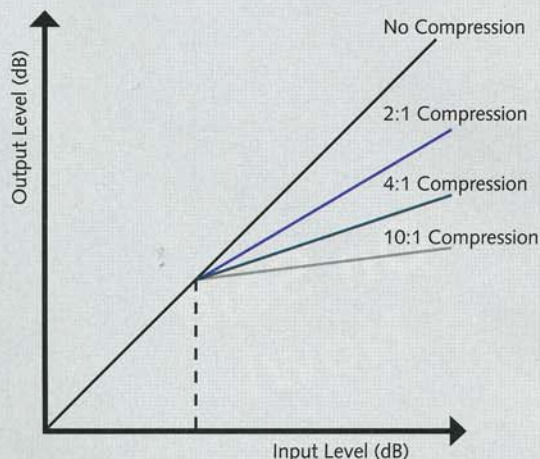
When using the compressor with other effects, place the compressor in front of your effects chain, as it helps to control the noise from the other effects plus it gives the other effects a stronger signal to work with, too.

Squishing on a star: Classic Compression-assisted tracks

- Elephant Talk. King Crimson. Guitarist Adrian Belew used an MXR Dyna Comp pedal to beef up his incredibly funky rhythm playing on this 1981 track. Fresh from working with Talking Heads (whose leader David Byrne is an accomplished rhythm guitarist and another Dyna Comp devotee) Belew's bright heavily compressed Strat tones lent the revitalised prog band a new hard edged sound. His legendary control of guitar feedback owes a lot to a combination of LOTS of compression and plenty of gain, which in those days was often from an old Electro Harmonix fuzz tone.
- Walking on the Moon. The Police. Andy Summers, what can we say? If you hated everything about the chorused-out, delay soaked 80s guitar sounds, blame the Policeman! But what is there to possibly hate about such a unique and ultimately tasteful player like Andy? His control of effects is phenomenal and that majestic Dm9 intro chord – dripping with compression and flanging – is so cool it makes your nose bleed. **PM**

Compressor Input/Output

See diagram below: The compressor weakens the input signal only when it is above the threshold value. Above that threshold, a change in the input level produces a smaller change in the output level.



A compressor pedal is a secret weapon that enhances sustain and adds a funky edge to your guitar sound