

'LEXI Coology

BOUTIQUE FIRM THD UNVEILS ITS FIRST CLASS A/B 50-WATT AMPLIFIER FOR THOSE WHO WANT A BIT MORE COMPH. **MICK TAYLOR** FINDS IT PULLING NO PUNCHES

GBINFO

THD FLEXI 50

PRICE: £1499

BUILT IN: USA

TYPE: All-tube head

POWER: 50 watts (switchable to 20)

VALVES: 2 x 12AX7, 1 x 12AT7, 2 x EL34 (as standard, many other combinations possible)

FEATURES: Single channel with boost mode, Hi/lo input (switchable with boost), bright switch, switchable boost, switchable master volume, 20W & 50W settings, series effects loop, TRS line out with level control, 2 x speaker outs with impedance selector, bias test points for power tubes 1 & 2

FOOTSWITCH: THD two-button included

COVER: No

DIMENSIONS: 205(h) x 387(w) x 275(d) mm

WEIGHT: 18kg

CONTACT: Synergy Distribution

PHONE: 01827 313134

WEB: www.thdelectronics.com

The name THD will already be familiar to anyone with even a passing interest in quality vacuum tube guitar amps. Although the company has been trading since 1987 – boasting the ‘world’s first’ reissue amplifier in that year, based on a Fender Bassman – it was 2001’s UniValve head that really upped the ante and thus established THD as a world-class contender for professional amplifiers.

Head honcho Andy Marshall and his team introduced that single-channel, 15-watt head with a lone, interchangeable power tube amid the burgeoning hype bubble of digital modelling. He was either mad, or he believed wholeheartedly in something that we all secretly knew: nothing beats a singing tube amp when it comes to classic guitar tone.

The UniValve then spawned the BiValve (two output tubes), both amps using relatively low-powered

class A design, and extending the family further now comes the Flexi 50. It’s a class A/B design for more punch and power, and has a whole raft of player-friendly features for both live and studio work.

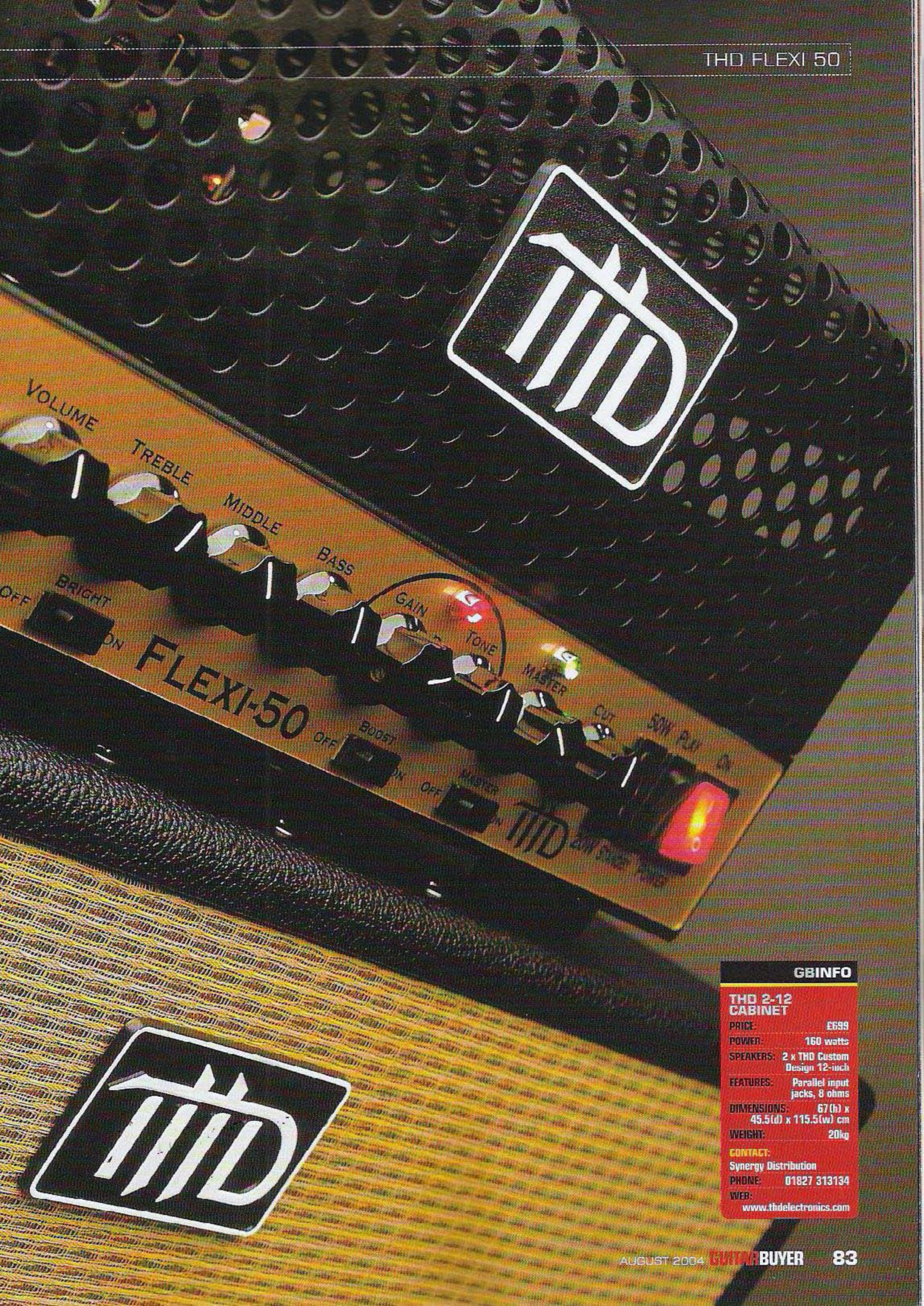
PRE & POWER AMP

Despite its apparent bells and whistles, the Flexi 50 is still a single-channel design. While some less scrupulous manufacturers may claim multi-channels – where in fact there are merely extra modes, or switchable circuitry – THD wears its one channel with pride. Don’t let that fool you into thinking it’s a one-trick pony however, because within that one channel, you firstly have the option to switch between ‘hi’ and ‘lo’ input levels; add extra high sparkle with a ‘bright’ switch; boost in an extra overdrive section (and choose to switch the input level at the same time if you want); and last but not least, get it all happening at lower levels with a footswitchable, hard-

bypass master volume. And that’s just for starters.

The cornerstone of the Flexi 50’s raison d’être is the power section where first of all, it’s possible to run in either 50- or 20-watt modes for different headroom characteristics. Then, should you so desire, you can whip off the (very swanky looking) ventilated steel cover and swap the output tubes for whatever you like. The Flexi 50 comes as standard with a pair of Chinese EL34s, though you can substitute 6L6es, 6650s, K166s, 6Y6s and what have you. Essential to the process is a quick rebias for new tubes via the test points on the rear panel (read about that on page 84).

The same is true of the preamp tubes (you can change preamp tubes safely in most amps as they are all self-biasing), so on paper at least, there’s an enormous amount of tone-shaping potential here, without having to include masses of buttons, switches and extra circuitry. Closer inspection reveals the Flexi 50 to be



GBINFO

THD 2-12 CABINET

PRICE: £699
POWER: 160 watts
SPEAKERS: 2 x THD Custom Design 12-inch
FEATURES: Parallel input jacks, 8 ohms
DIMENSIONS: 67(h) x 45.5(d) x 115.5(w) cm
WEIGHT: 20kg

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A SLEEKER SPEAKER

THD'S 2-12 CABINET IS THE IDEAL PARTNER FOR THE FLEXI 50

THD's 2-12 cabinet gives voice to the Flexi 50 head, and it's a typically high quality affair using finger-jointed 3/4-inch birch ply, covered in black vinyl.

Nickel-plated steel corners look classic straight out of the box, and unlike a lot of 2x12 extension cabs, it has a vibration-proof, recessed handle in the top which is practical from both a carrying and putting-things-on-top point of view. The cab is ported to the rear, almost open-back in fact, with a two-inch gap that runs the length of the rear panel. This is

designed to offer the air and breath you get from an open-back design without sacrificing too much punch and bottom end that you'd get with a completely closed design.

THD's 12-inch speakers are custom-designed 80-watt units that receive a tweak to various areas of the cone with a polymer that is said to firstly help the speaker sound more 'played in' right from new, and also improve the speaker's longevity slightly. All up it's relatively compact and lightweight.

"IT'S PRETTY MUCH ALWAYS SOUNDS GREAT IN A CLASSIC, FULL, MUSICAL MANNER"

beautifully built. As well as the high quality powder-coated steel chassis and grille, the little things impress too, such as spring-mounted screws for the preamp tubes' cover and top grille. They'll never fall out and get lost; moreover, in the unlikely event of them coming loose, they won't rattle. All the pots and switches feel fabulously high quality, although they all protrude from the chassis, meaning they're vulnerable to damage in uncaring hands/the boot of the car. I

think if you buy a THD amp, you ought to buy a case too - it's



The boost mode has a lone tone control for EQ

perfectly roadworthy, but it makes sense to preserve those lovely looks.

Internally, THD boss Andy Marshall has clearly applied his gargantuan electronics expertise to the design and layout of the components. He's a strong advocate of printed circuit board amps as long as those PCBs are designed 'right'. And in this case we have thick, through-plated boards that don't flex as the basis for super high-quality components thereafter. Custom transformers, pots, switches; everything feels almost over-engineered - this is one seriously high quality guitar amp.

SOUNDS

Where to start? The clue is really all in the Flexi 50's name - with so many options for tube substitution, the overall volume, gain and tonal colour of this amplifier is to some extent a blank page - write on it what you will.

So to begin with, I tried the 'standard' configuration of regular 12AX7s/12AT7 for the preamp and EL34s in the power section. Running at 50 watts, there's bags of clean headroom, albeit in a nice, chunky way. The useful bright switch and global 'cut' control help tailor the tone to your pickups and general preferences, after which you get into the nitty gritty of gain structure and colour. With the master switched in you can use the left-most volume to go from Fendery-type clean, to a nice, sagging browned-off edge that's perfect for vintage-type blues with Strats and Teles, for example. P90s and humbuckers turn this into a good classic rock rhythm tone with enough drive to sound full and fat - plenty enough drive for many players - yet retain the note definition of whatever guitar you're using.

Switch the master volume out - be sure to turn the volume down - ties gain and master volume into the left-most knob, where you can push the Flexi 50's power section along with the pre a la AC30. In 20-watt mode this gives a wonderfully rich presentation of your source for small gigs or

recording, again retaining all of the guitar's inherent tone. In 50-watt mode it opens the power section right out (where having the master switched in brings a more compressed, lower-headroom feel)

ARE YOU BIASED?

NOTES ON MAKING THOSE TUBES RUN RIGHT

Vacuum tubes need 'biasing' in order for your amplifier to work properly in terms of power output and tube saturation (distortion).

In a fixed-bias amp, the bias is the amount of DC current flowing across the tube at idle (with no signal flowing). Why? Well, it determines how the tube runs at tickover, to make sure it does the right thing when you step on the accelerator and start playing your guitar (an oft-used analogy on the subject).

Different tube types operate differently, and therefore the bias needs adjusting when you change tubes. For example, swapping to the supplied 6L6s from the EL34s in the Flexi 50 showed a bias voltage of 0.48 volts before adjustment (the Flexi 50 is correctly biased at 0.25 volts). That much voltage would make the tubes run too hot, meaning less headroom before distortion, and reduced tube life.

To measure the bias voltage, you run the amplifier with no signal, connecting your voltmeter to the relevant points on the rear panel and make the necessary adjustment using the screws. Easy peasy, and with just a few millivolts running through the bias points, you won't get electrocuted.

PLEASE NOTE: Do not venture inside any amplifier chassis if you are not an expert. Tube amps carry lethal voltages, so be warned.

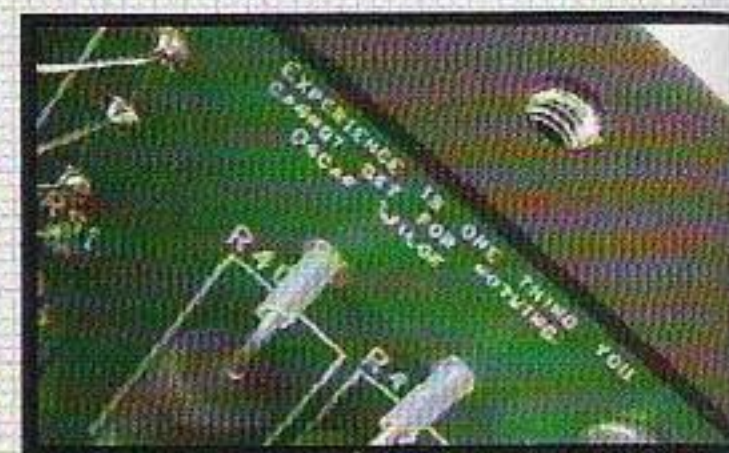


DETAILS

A MUSICAL, HONEST AMP THAT WILL FULLY RESPECT YOUR GUITAR'S INTEGRITY



■ These two switches alone offer a great deal of tonal variation from the Flexi 50



■ Each circuit board even gets its own famous quote!

GBCONCLUSION

VERSATILE AND THANKFULLY NOT OVERLY COMPLICATED FOR EITHER STAGE OR STUDIO USE

■ The principle of using different valves in your amp to create different tones isn't a new one, yet to package it in such a player-friendly amp and make it sound heavenly to boot is an impressive achievement indeed from THD.

Straight out of the box and loaded with two EL34s, the Flexi 50 and 2-12 cab would suit any pro-minded roots, blues or classic rock player either live or in the studio. What's particularly impressive is the wide range of gain, and the ability to go from a straight-up, high-headroom feel to a more squashy, compressed master volume texture at the push of a footswitch. Over two grand for the package puts it very much in the pro market alongside Boogie, Soldano, Bad Cat et al, and among that company it holds its head high indeed. It's a very honest, musical sounding amp, so if you love the sound of your guitar, you're likely to love this too. **GB**

GBRATINGS

THD FLEXI 50 & 2-12 CAB	
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★★



■ Using THD's Yellow Jackets, you can substitute EL84s in any EL34 or 6L6 amp - including the Flexi 50

to get huge and clear note definition with enough punch to cut through. Thanks to the intuitive tone controls - where you're given a sensible range of options, ie not just all the useful stuff in the middle fifth of the pot's range - this means literally anything from warm jazz to cutting, gritty-edge country from the basic non-boosted tone; it's a roots player's dream. Switching in the 'boost' (either via the front panel or using the included footswitch) ushers in an extra swathe of gain and mid kick that takes you into heavier rock territory should you so desire. Again, the excellent tone controls enable you to shape the overall voice, for example dialling out mids for a more modern sound. That said, the Flexi 50 doesn't really do metal, it's forte being altogether more toneful, mid-rich drive sounds that'll cover the lot from classic EVH to Brian May and beyond. It loves stompboxes too; I hooked up a Crowther Audio

Hot Cake and Blackstone Overdrive for even more drive textures and flavours. It really is an articulate voice that can punch through single notes with power and confidence at any volume level, rather than some fizzy mess. Hooray for the boost mode's dedicated tone control too, which enables you to attenuate upper mids and high-end to suit your style. Some players may bemoan the lack of a dedicated EQ section, but the boost is designed to do exactly that - boost the basic tone, not be some radical 'other' sound. And so to the interchangeable tubes. First stop was to install a pair of workaday 6L6 power tubes. Bearing in mind we're talking the same amp and circuit, we're not expecting a Marshall-to-Fender type transition, yet the Flexi 50 nevertheless responds differently with the new tubes. Less direct in the middle frequencies; perhaps with less immediacy and punch, but rounder and more airy all at once. The 20-watt setting with 6V6s is just fabulous for the studio. You can really get the amp cooking to exquisite fat and fruity delight at sensible levels, though it's likely you'll shove in what you've always used and leave it be. It's tempting to descend into misty-eyed, what-you-think-you're-hearing cobbles here; those with true 'dog ears' will hear the subtleties, and they're certainly more noticeable at volume, but the overall impression is that whatever you use to power the Flexi 50, it pretty much always sounds great in a classic, full and musical manner.

GBOPINION

- THD FLEXI 50 GOLD STARS**
- ★ Extremely versatile for classic tones
 - ★ Beautifully made
 - ★ Looks fantastic
- BLACK MARKS**
- Protruding knobs - you'll need a case for the head
 - No effects loop level control
- IDEAL FOR...**
- Blues and rock players wanting a straight, honest tone with heaps of texture and touch sensitivity