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It's super modification-friendly, sounds amazing... is the Flexi-50 composed entirely of strengths?

THD amplifiers are a textbook example of the latter category. Headed by electronics wizard Andy Marshall -- no relation to Jim -- the company consistently produces uncompromising products characterised by an earnest disregard for dusty conventions. The company's aim is essentially to make amplifiers that sound just as good on the record as they do onstage and in the rehearsal studio. And just as importantly, to keep the prices of these incredible amps low enough for them to be attainable for the average guitarist.

THD Flexi-50: sight and touch

The Flexi-50's layout is as economic as it is accessible. It's a lot shorter, and therefore lighter, than a standard long head -- plus, the absence of a ply cabinet also helps ease the burden, while simultaneously ensuring a unique, sophisticated and very contemporary look. A perforated steel cage covers a pair of stock EL-34s, the 12AX7s of the preamp and the beefy transformers arranged neatly on the business surface of the chassis. And the whole thing fits neatly into a padded Cordura-type carry bag.

The cage is attached with four springloaded bolts, whose heads are striated around the perimeter to facilitate removal without the need for tools. And being a captive-bolt design, they have no chance of rolling off your workbench to be lost forever in the guts of that old stereo you're going to repair any month now.

Everything on the chassis is clearly labelled, including the extensive list of what power and preamp valves can be used to replace the standard-issue units. There is also a highly comprehensive manual with the amplifier -- including a step-by-step 'how to' on changing and biasing power tubes. Those guitarists who regard biasing your own amp as tantamount to one of the black arts may well take heart at how straightforward it actually is when explained in simple terms.

On the Flexi-50's neat front panel, from left, is the input jack, volume, treble, middle, and bass controls, then a pair of pots controlling the 'boost' circuit. Gain is self-explanatory, while Tone does the job of a summed EQ section. Not intended as an entire second channel, the two controls nevertheless allow for a significant difference in voicing when you punch the circuit.

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Words: Gun Arvidssen
Photography: Ciri Arvidssen

In the microcosm of guitars and related hardware, there are times when ripping up the rulebook and designing something according to a completely unorthodox set of strategies results in some abomination that goes ass-up in seconds and meets its doom on eBay alongside scores of other novelty collectibles. Fortunately, however, the same principle of breaking with tradition and forging into the unknown is the reason for the most dramatic advances and innovations in the way we play guitar and how we sound.

"After driving over it about 15 times with a pickup truck it developed a slight dent, so we increased the steel thickness to 12-gauge. We haven't had any further problems."

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"Many owners of this amplifier -- no matter how diverse their playing styles -- may be of the secret opinion that the Flexi-50 was built exclusively for their musical demographic"

The last two controls are the (defeatable) master stage and a 'Cut' knob. At first glance, Cut is a touch counter-intuitive since it actually refers to something similar to 'presence' -- as in, it's all about cutting through the mix -- as opposed to cutting anything crucial from the output. Unlike a negative-feedback type presence control, however, the Cut lifts overall brightness without affecting the amplifier's gain.

Beneath the input jack is a hi/low switch, while above the jack a yellow LED makes it instantly clear which option is selected. There is also a 'Bright' switch, as well as switches activating the boost and master stages. Finally there is a 50W/20W selector and the usual standby and power switches.

The rear panel is just as economical and well laid-out: there's the AC in jack and fuses, followed by the bias test points for both power tubes. There are 1/4in send and return jacks for the series FX loop, as well as a pair of jacks for activating Master and Boost from the unkillable footswitch. Beneath these is an ingenious option to 'switch input with boost'. As the label suggests, this toggles your input level from the low to high setting whenever the boost is activated.

Above the balanced TRS line out is an associated level control, while below it is a switch to select from either line or instrument level (+4dB or -10dB respectively). The amplifier also has a pair of parallel speaker outs which, coupled with a load switch, cater for everything from 2 to 16 Ohm cabinets. And you've got to love an amp that is individually autographed by its maker.

One of the truly admirable things about the Flexi-50 is how well-suited it is to the needs of virtually any guitar player. Whether you're an intermediate guitarist saving up for that first hot valve rig, or the seasoned pro who always fantasised about an amp running one 6L6 and one EL-84 (courtesy of THD's Yellow Jacket valve adaptor) in the power stage, plus some equally Frankensteinian



The footswitch is so meaty that you almost expect to be asked if you want fries with it



combination of preamp tubes, you will find your match in this amplifier. In fact, I imagine most owners of this amplifier -- no matter how diverse their playing styles -- will be of the secret opinion that the Flexi-50 was built exclusively for their musical demographic.

While reviewing this amplifier, every time I discovered a new way of applying some feature or utilising the layout, I had this spooky déjà-vu-like feeling that the THD crew had thought of every damn thing, foreseen every possibility a guitarist could want to squeeze from this machine. Take, for example, the monstrous footswitch. "After trying 16-gauge steel and deciding it was too flimsy we built the switch from 14-gauge. Unfortunately after driving over it about 15 times with a pickup truck it developed a slight dent, so we increased the thickness to 12-gauge. We haven't had any further problems." The Boost side of things is pretty obvious, but being able to defeat the master stage from the footswitch means that although you only have one channel, in practice, you can still choose from three significantly different gain structures.

THD 4-12 extension speaker: sight and touch

As with the Flexi-50 itself, the THD is designed from scratch to be innovative and functional, and it sounds goddamn amazing as a result. The cabinet is solidly bolted together from 19mm birch ply, fingerjointed at the corners, and strategically reinforced throughout. The unit is mounted on rubber bumpers and supplied with US-made clip-in castors, which, along with the inset steel handles, reduce the possibility for any rattle. The cabinet has a bass-reflex design, although instead of locating a tunnel-type port through the front, there is simply a wide, narrow slot cut into the lower back of the unit.

Mounted inside are two THD [Continued](#)



Vintage speakers and two THD longhorns, in an alternating combination, connected to the steel jack dish and its Switchcraft jacks with Belden wire. The 2x12 equivalent of this cabinet can allegedly hold its own against the average 4x half stack; judging by the rocket-motor-sized woof we could get this cabinet up to -- running a 50W head, remember -- the 2x12 would indeed suffice for many applications.

The framed grille cloth is perfectly fitted, mounted on Velcro and easily removable thanks to a pair of tape tags along its lower edge. Taking off the grille reveals a diffusion panel mounted over the speakers, whose aim is to even out the spike of high frequencies that gather directly in front of the cones.

Hearing

Just as some amplifiers imbue any guitar sound with their unique personality, one of the big selling points of the Flexi-50 is that it doesn't. Sure, it enhances the sound in ways which, at first thought, seem unachievable, but its first function is serve your guitar. It's interesting to note how clearly various characteristics of your guitar's timbre can be heard even through the fizziest overdrive you can dial up on the amp.

It's not often that an amp will let you hear the difference between two guitar leads, and I don't mean a crackly old Dick Smith job next to a spanking new Planet Waves. Issues such as whether gold-plated tips make any difference and whether thicker shielding is a big deal are resolved once and for all -- admittedly, without auditioning the two side by side, you might not notice so much. But the difference is definitely audible.

Loaded with the supplied EL-34s, the Flexi-50's sound is quite reminiscent of a Marshall, except that it is laced with a kind of more sophisticated, cosmopolitan range of highlights. This is not a two-channel amp per se, and as such if you want something to go from Antarctic-icemelt-clean to squirting fire like a burning oil well circa Gulf War I, it ain't gonna happen. Both extremes are readily achievable through the Flexi-50, but generally speaking you're looking at an either/or situation.

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THD Flexi-50

Origin USA (both items)

Format

Single-channel amplifier head

Output

50W or 20W at
2, 4, 8, or 16 Ohms

Chassis

Steel, under steel cage

Controls

Volume, bass, middle, treble;
boost stage: gain and boost,
master stage: master, cut;
line out level

Notable...

Individual tube biasing points,
speaker impedance selection,
hi/lo input switchable with boost
activation, switch-defeatable. A
variant with a long-head type ply
box is on the drawing board

THD Flexi-50 & 4x12 cab,
AU\$3899 & AU\$2199
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Depending on issues such as the output of your pickups, using your guitar's volume control will give you a lot of intermediate shades of drive, but again, if you're after a jump from one end of the spectrum to the other, you're better off lining in a stompbox.

And despite being a winner in its own right, the Flexi-50 is an outstanding choice for use with FX pedals. Whether you patch something into the series loop or just put a TubeScreamer between your axe and the 'input' jack, this stack is the ultimate way to hear how good -- or bad -- your FX pedals are. Take heed: extreme fidelity is a double-edged sword, and we had to play with a couple of our settings to fix some shortcomings that had been smoothed over by an existing rig. But once you get it right, you'll never heard a flanger sound more whooshy or a MetalZone more satanic.

Especially when used in conjunction with the THD 4-12, it's almost too easy to get a ripping tone

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THD 4x12 Cab

Format

4x12in ported cabinet

Cabinet

19mm birch ply

Speakers

2 x 12in THD Vintage plus
2 x 12in THD Longhorn

Rating

320W @ 16 Ohms



