

Guitar Player, Dec. 1992: A 13 Amp Shootout, by Andy Ellis (must change name to Andy Ellis- included in permission agreement)

THD PLEXI RIVERB 410 (\$2,224). Resplendent in its tweed covering and brown grill cloth, the Plexi Reverb is the latest in THD's line of variations on the 4x10 Fender Bassman theme. The handbuilt combo features Normal and Bright channels, each with its own volume control and dual inputs. Both channels share a common set of treble, bass, middle, and presence controls. The Plexi extracts 65 watts from a pair of Groove Tubes EL34s to drive four 10" THD Longhorn speakers. The rear panel, or more correctly the underside of the chassis, contains the speaker and external speaker jacks, reverb knob, effects send and return jacks, and footswitch jack. There's also a mystery mode switch, which we *think* changes output impedance, that's intended as an additional tone control. We tried it-it works.

Encased in a finger-jointed birch-ply cabinet, the THD's circuitry is exposed by removing a tweed-covered rear panel and a steel cover plate that's secured by 14 screws. This amp uses seven PC boards and one small bread-board containing the reverb send circuit. The only IC we could find is on this circuit, which serves as an impedance buffer and takes the place of a reverb transformer. The interior is laid out neatly and the parts quality is very high. The two EL34s and four preamp tubes are affixed to separate shock-mounted assemblies; this helps protect the tubes from the kind of banging around they're bound to receive in transit. This is a great idea; anything that prolongs tube life is a real bonus. The reverb tank sits on rubber grommets, instead of being screwed directly to the wood. This helps to isolate the tank from the cabinet's vibrations. (When we got the Plexi, we discovered one of the reverb springs was kaput. We replaced the tank and continued on our merry way.) The Plexi Reverb is protected by four internal fuses plus an external power-line fuse. A voltage selector is accessible through the steel cover plate; THD says this selector acts like a Variac. In the U.S., you can set the selector to 140V and the amp will respond as if it were getting less than 100V. We tried this trick and found it lowers the volume and tightens up the bottom end. Handy meter points and detailed instructions make this amp particularly easy to bias.

The Plexi Reverb is a crunchy, distorted-sounding amp that exudes a strong rock and roll persona with a bright, snarly, vintage Fender timbre. Plugged into the Bright channel, we could set the presence and treble knobs at zero and the tone would still be quite clear. In this channel, the controls are very interactive; we found that the unused Normal volume knob affected the bass frequencies even more than the bass control. When we plugged into the Normal channel, the Bright volume knob acted like a notch filter. Settings from 5-8 yielded a cool, skanky midrange dip. At settings above 8, the bass boosted to the point of mushiness. This interaction between channels does not occur to nearly the same degree on either the Kendrick 4212 or Fender Reissue Bassman; it's the secret to getting a great sound from the THD.

We A/B'd the Plexi with a particularly juicy '73 Marshall JMP 50-watt head, both amps driving similar 4x12 cabs, and found the THD sounded very close to it. The Plexi comes with a 12AY7 preamp tube in a special holder. You can swap this for the 12AX7/7025 in the first position for a cleaner sound. Custom mods are also available from

THD. (The Plexi, in fact, originated from a customer's request. It's now THD's best seller.) Comments: "Nice sweet lead tone." "Though it looks like a tweed, it sounds British." "Lots of sounds, thanks to the interactive volume controls." "Buttery lead tone reminiscent of Eric Johnson."

The final Shootout. As you'd expect, we shared healthy differences of opinion throughout our listening tests. But when it came to selecting our favorite amps, we reached a consensus. Four champs emerged—two retro, two modern—backed in various degrees by our six players: the VHT Pittbull, the Marshall 30th Anniversary, The THD Plexi Reverb, and the Kendrick 4212.

The relentlessly tough-toned Pittbull ate the other Shootout contenders alive, with a couple of notable exceptions: Connected to an equal or greater number of speakers, the Marshall 30th Anniversary can hang with the VHT, though the Anniversary tends to sound rounder than the Pittbull. The latter simply has more headroom. For our own satisfaction, we ran the Pittbull into the Marshall's single speaker and the Marshall into the Pittbull's twin speakers. Guess which sounded better? Yep, two speakers kick ass on a single one (there's a moral here).

The Kendrick, with its powerful Texas mojo, was also able to stand its ground against the Pittbull. However, the Kendrick's tone is much more dispersed; it's also proudly retro. The Kendrick engulfs you in a wave of sound; the Pittbull slams you like a high-pressure firehose. The only amp that could really put the Pittbull in its cage was an incredibly loud '74 Marshall Super Lead had that we A/B'd against the VHT (both amps driving single 4x12 cabinets loaded with old 30-watt Celestions). In this test, the Super Lead's muscular lower-mid drive simply eclipsed the VHT's best efforts, though the Pittbull's bottom was tighter.

The THD Plexi rewarded us with a sweet, creamy lead sound, once we got the hang of the volume control interaction. We did some A/B comparisons with the Kendrick and found the Plexi Reverb more compressed and brilliant than the 4212. We also found it easier to get a singing, sustained lead sound on the Plexi, which implores you to wail. The Plexi mushes out faster on the low end, however, making the Kendrick, with its tighter bottom and surplus headroom, the superior choice for rhythm and grooves.

Bottom line: The Kendrick sets a new standard for Fender-based vintage repros. We've never heard louder, tougher tweed. The THD is simply a gas for lead playing. With its four 10" speakers and reverb, it strikes us as an ideal club amp in a "British Super Reverb" sort of way. For contemporary sounds, we're divided between the Marshall and VHT. The blue-clad 30th Anniversary is more versatile, thanks to its compensated recording outs, MIDI channel switching, parallel effects loop, speaker damping switches, and myriad preamp modes. Unlike the VHT, each of the three channels has its own EQ. In some ways, the Pittbull's footswitchable graphic EQ compensates for its shared EQ sections. The VHT has a hungry, pecky, lunging tone that can only be termed dangerous. It looks wicked too, with its black Tolex and menacing runic logo. Drag the Pittbull to a gig, ain't no one's gonna mess with you. Rrrrr!