

THD Flexi-50 head £1,499



Hot glass with lots of class: THD's Flexi-50 head makes its world debut here in *Guitarist*. Is it really as good as everyone's saying it is? by Nick Guppy

The rivals

Ashdown Peacemaker 50	£1,349
Orange Retro 50	£1,399
Cornford MK50 head	£1,699

Cornford's MK50 is one of the Flexi's few real competitors, with a great sound, excellent build quality and it's probably the closest in terms of features. Orange's hand-built Retro nails the vintage Brit sound better than almost anything – if your favourite colour is orange then it's a must to audition. Ashdown's Peacemaker has looks, tone, features and sound to die for – it's a serious boutique amp on a par with the world's best

THD's award-winning UniValve was our amp of the year back in 2001, and alongside the BiValve-30 it continues to enjoy massive popularity, even having its own unofficial fan club that can be found at www.univalve.net. Following on from Class A single-ended success, THD's CEO and designer Andy Marshall has returned to Class AB push-pull for the eagerly anticipated Flexi-50, which made its world debut at Music Live back in November. *Guitarist* was there, and we're the world's first magazine to take an in-depth look at it.

Occupying the same hard-as-nails precision folded steel chassis as its Class A cousins, the Flexi-50 is a single channel head delivering a conservative 50 watts from a pair of EL34 valves and packed with features that promise considerable versatility.

As you'd expect, the Flexi's component count is much higher. The densely populated main audio board

occupies most of the chassis space, with three smaller boards for the power supply, transformer-coupled line out and rear panel bias controls. THD's printed circuit board quality simply has no equal: these PCBs are all through-plated, the fibreglass/epoxy base is 1.5 times thicker than you'll find on most guitar amps and copper tracks are four to-eight times thicker, which has a positive impact on sound and reliability. All front and rear panel components are chassis mounted, including the valve bases; consequently the wiring is intensive yet neatly routed and tied back around the hi-fi style internal shielding baffles.

THD's front panels are traditionally an area where artistry and functionality meet. The Flexi-50's is gold plexiglas, paying a subtle homage to one of its inspirations. "One of my objectives with this amp was to create an idealised 'Flexi' tone," Andy explains, "not just a

simple clone of that vintage British sound, but something which embodied my ideal version of it. The gold panel was one of those 'why not?' moments."

The control layout is straightforward, with a few typical 'boutique' twists. Next to the single input jack there's a volume knob followed by treble, mid-range and bass, after this come boost level and tone controls, then master volume and 'cut' – an overall brightness control similar to that found on Vox AC30 Top Boost models. Below the rotary controls are four small rocker switches: one below the input jack switches sensitivity from low to high and there's a bright switch underneath the treble knob; the third switch toggles the gain boost and the fourth bypasses the master volume. Next to the mains and standby switches yet another rocker lets you reduce output power to around 20 watts by lowering the output valves' plate voltage.



The rear panel packs a lot of features too. There's a series effects loop and a vari-level balanced line out that can be switched from line to instrument levels, allowing you to slave the Flexi to power amps or use it to drive another guitar amp's input. Another small rocker links the front panel sensitivity switch with the gain boost function. Next to this is the Flexi's bias panel, with separate test points and recessed adjusters for both output valves, eliminating the need to use matched pairs. There are two jacks for the Flexi's very substantial footswitch, which controls gain boost and master volume defeat. The footswitch is included, as is a deluxe Planet Waves dual-mono instrument lead, though any instrument or speaker lead will work. "No audio passes through the cable, and the voltages are compatible with any decent MIDI controller that allows external relay switching," comments Andy. "The Flexi-50's relays are ultra fast and you won't hear any clicks or pops."

SOUNDS: The Flexi's un-boosted character is more American than British: lower settings deliver rich sparkling three-dimensional tones that move smoothly into cranked Deluxe and Bassman territory as the volume control is edged past halfway. Players who enjoy great clean sounds will find a huge sonic playground here. The Flexi is very touch sensitive, with stacks of headroom and that unique THD bell-like chiming quality which frequently fools people into looking for a phantom chorus pedal – it's also

THD FLEXI-50 HEAD TEST RESULTS	
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

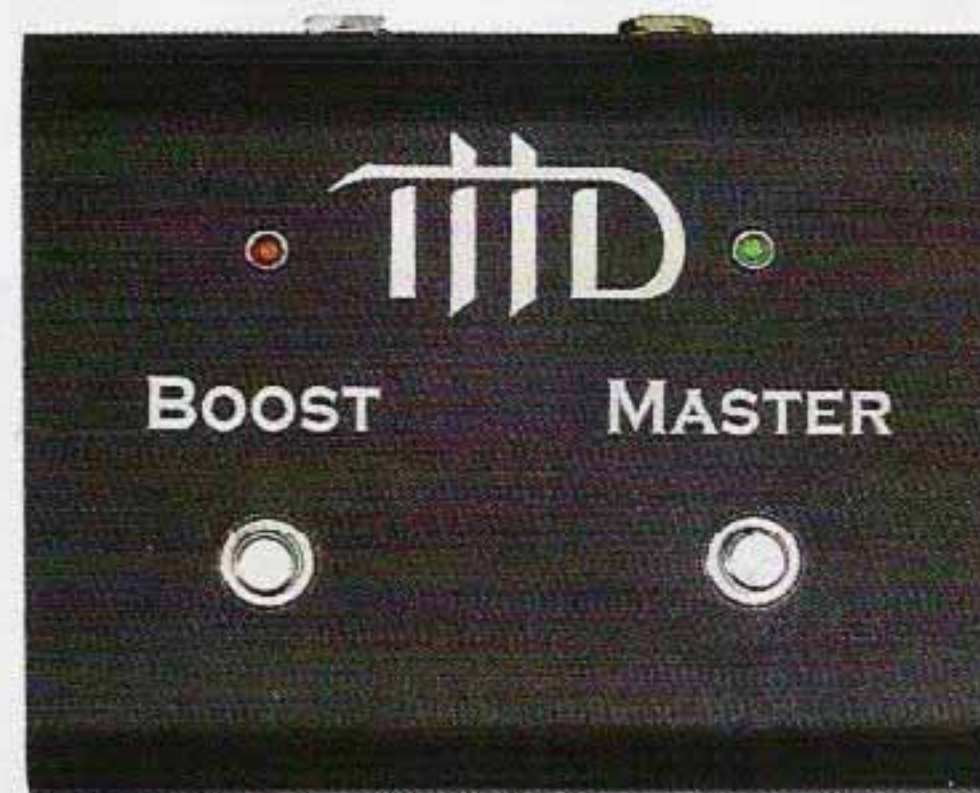
WE LIKED Exquisite tone, good looks and useful features, plus street cred. Also, it's designed and built to last a lifetime
WE DISLIKED The case isn't best suited to live gigging

remarkably transparent, reproducing every nuance of the guitar with almost un-nerving clarity.

This tonal transparency extends to the way the Flexi interacts with loudspeakers; as many THD owners have already discovered, different drivers can make a profound impact on the way these amps sound and respond. If you want to hear the Flexi-50 at its best, then THD's ported cabinet which uses two dissimilar custom-made chemically aged drivers is undoubtedly the best choice, albeit an expensive one. For our test, we mainly used a 2 x 12 open-back cabinet fitted with Celestion Vintage 30s, which did a good job of balancing the dynamic mid-range, subtle highs and smooth bass response.

The Flexi's tone controls are deceptively powerful, yet always musical. "The treble and bass network is similar to the UniValve or BiValve-30," reckons Andy. "The mid-range is something quite unique that took over a year to perfect. It's a special filter arrangement not normally used on guitar amps that gives very precise control and makes a dramatic

The tone is simply breathtaking and for evoking the likes of Kossoff, SRV, Rory Gallagher or Hendrix, it's probably close as you'll get without reincarnation



difference depending on how it's set in relation to the other two controls."

Hitting the boost changes the Flexi's character for an equally wide palette of vintage Brit-inspired overdrive sounds. The transition can be made more distinct by using the rear panel-linked sensitivity function, automatically switching the input from low to high sensitivity as the boost is engaged. Because the Flexi isn't a dual channel amplifier, players looking to switch from very clean rhythm to the highest gain lead sounds may have to compromise a little, but the boost range will suit most needs. The tone is simply breathtaking and for evoking the likes of Kossoff, SRV, Rory

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GUITAR AMPS  INTERACTIVE

THD FLEXI-50 HEAD

PRICE: £1,499

ORIGIN: Seattle, USA

TYPE: All-valve class AB head with solid-state rectification

OUTPUT: Nominal 50W RMS

VALVES: Two ECC83/12AX7, one ECC81/12AT7 preamp, two EL34 power amp

DIMENSIONS: 205 (h) x 390 (w) x 230mm (d)

WEIGHT: (kg/lb): 15/33

CABINET: Powder-coated steel

CHANNELS: One

FOOTSWITCH: Toggles boost function and master volume defeat (included)

CONTROLS: Volume, bass, mid, treble, boost level, boost tone, cut, master volume

ADDITIONAL

FEATURES: Switchable input sensitivity which can be linked to boost function, bright switch, master volume defeat switch, hi/lo power switching, dual

loudspeaker outlets switchable from two to 16 ohm, series effects loop, transformer coupled variable line out switchable from line to instrument level. Dual rear panel bias permits use of most popular output valves, matched or unmatched – eg: EL34, 6L6, KT88, 6550, 5881, 6V6 (low power mode only) or EL84 (depending on Yellowjacket adaptor these can be used in either Class A or low power Class AB)

OPTIONS: THD special design ported 2 x 12 cabinet £725

RANGE OPTIONS: A range of head cabinets more suited to live use is coming soon, THD's other products include the Yellowjacket EL84 class A adaptors for most 50/100 watt circuits, and the famous Hotplate – arguably the world's only frequency-compensated loudspeaker attenuator
Synergy Distribution
01827 313134
www.synergystdistribution.co.uk
www.thdelectronics.com
www.univalve.net



→ Gallagher or Hendrix it's probably as close as you'll get without reincarnation. The Flexi doesn't need a ton of distortion to sound cranked up and those luscious lead sounds can be tuned to perfection with the dedicated boost tone control, while the switchable master volume allows the same sound at two levels if preferred.

The wide bias range means you can customise your tone with different output valves, even using mixed types at the same time. We tried many variations but kept coming back to the EL34s supplied with the amp as having by far the best overall sound, although

being able to use 6V6s to pull down the volume level was very useful – the Flexi can be seriously loud if you like it that way. If you're unfamiliar with biasing, fear not: all you need is a multi-meter and a small screwdriver.

Following the simple instructions on the rear panel, the whole operation takes less than 30 seconds to complete.

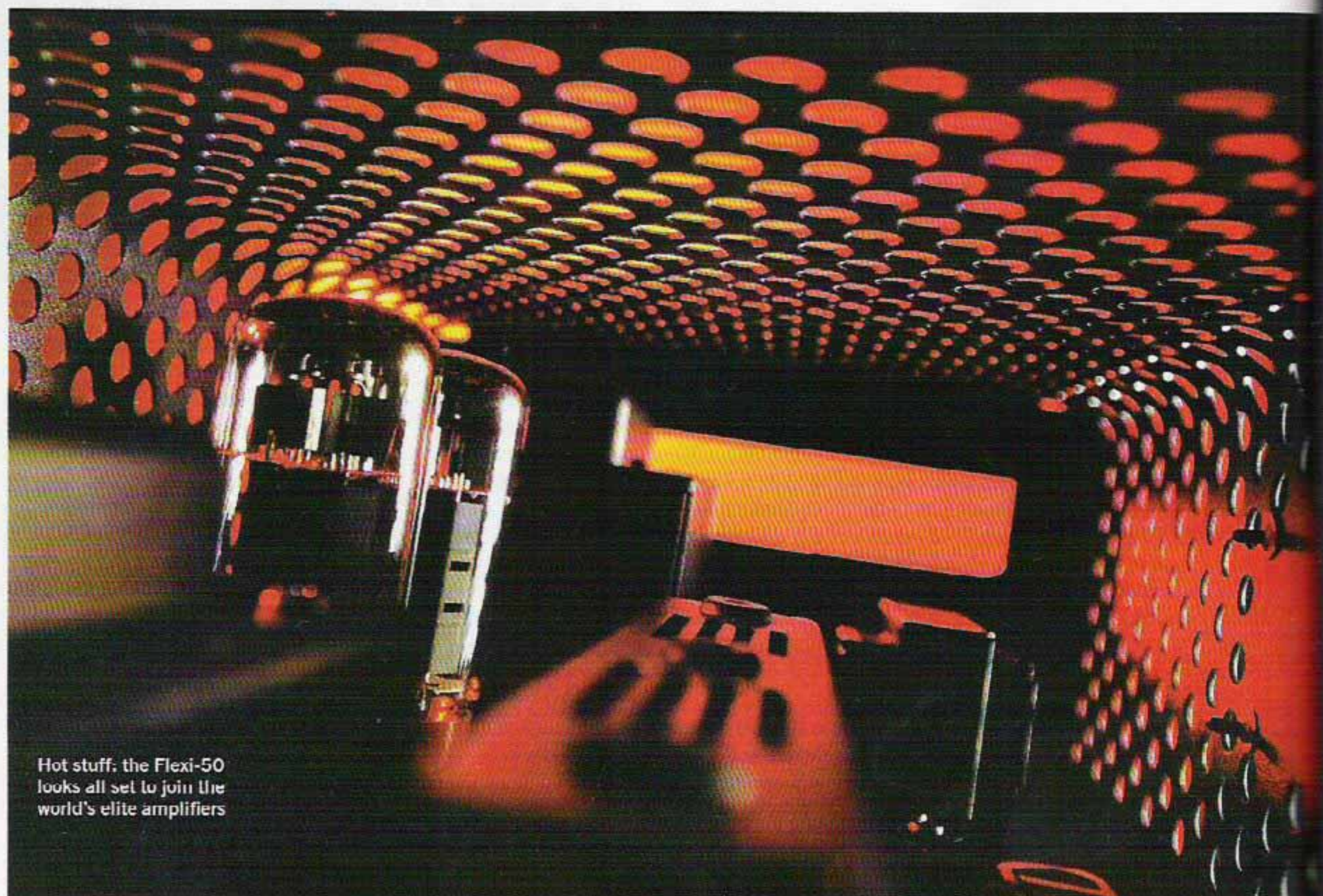
Verdict

It's not often a new amp generates such a worldwide wave of interest. THD's latest creation has a lot to live up to but more than meets our expectations. There's a lot of hand-wiring, which

means it isn't cheap, but at the price there's little, if anything, in the way of competition. Aimed at serious players looking for a wide range of classic sounds, we think the Flexi-50 is set to become one of the all-time 'holy grail' guitar amps. Like most of us, you've probably spent years looking for the ultimate tone – invariably with regrets about selling something years ago that had 'the sound'. Try the Flexi-50 and you'll never look back again. **G**

THD Flexi 50 Head

Guitarist **RATING**



Hot stuff: the Flexi-50 looks all set to join the world's elite amplifiers