



# THD UniValve head £899



### THD UNIVALVE HEAD

**PRICE:** £899

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** All valve single-ended amp head

**OUTPUT:** Nominal 15 watts RMS

**VALVES:** Choice of single EL34, 6L6, 5881, KT88, 6550, 5881, 6V6 and EL84 (with adaptor)

power valves; two ECC81, 2 or 3 in preamp

**DIMENSIONS:** 190 (h) x 390 (w) x 230 mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 8/18

**CABINET:** Powder coated steel

**CHANNELS:** One

**CONTROLS:** Volume, bass, treble, attitude, Hotplate level, Hotplate in/out, hi/lo voltage, noise reduction in/out, line out level and instrument/line switch

**ADDITIONAL**

**FEATURES:** Multiple valve choice with no rebiasing, Hotplate power attenuator, noise reduction circuit, transformer-isolated vari-level line out

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** None yet, but a range of head and combo cabinets more suited to live use is planned for early 2002. THD's other hot products include the Yellowjacket EL84 adaptors for most 50/100-watt circuits, and various standalone Hotplate attenuators for almost all impedance types

Just how much tone can you cram into an amp? The UniValve probably sets the record. It was one of the hottest new products at this year's NAMM and, finally, it's here by Nick Guppy

THD are based in Seattle, one of the world's guitar capitals, and Andy Marshall (THD's CEO and designer) is one of the top names in guitar amplification, with design credits for many other companies, as well as his own. Dubbed by no less a person than Aspen Pittman (of Groove Tubes fame) as, "the boutique amp builder's boutique amp builder", Andy's amps have been coveted in the States for a long time – the Type O having a massive reputation. But most of his recent work has been dedicated to this new head which debuted at this year's NAMM to great acclaim.

Like most overnight success stories, the UniValve didn't happen overnight at all. As Andy explains: "I always liked the concept of a single-ended guitar amplifier, so in 1994 I built a prototype of the UniValve with somewhat limited features, but the same basic design. We built five prototypes and had them in constant road and studio use in New

York, LA, Nashville and Seattle. We had no problems at all; either major or minor, and power tubes lasted much longer than we thought they would. This is the first time I've designed a product to be 100 per cent what I wanted in terms of look, sound and function, and the fact that it's being so well received is quite flattering."

We've said it before, but no-one beats the Americans when it comes to styling an amp, and the UniValve's looks are exemplary. The intricate chemically-etched patterns on the front panel are Andy's tribute to architect Frank Lloyd Wright and Mackintosh, one of the all-time great valve hi-fi amps, and the screen printing all over the chassis is as crisp as can be. Metalwork execution is absolutely immaculate too. Computer-aided tools, that hold tolerances of one thousandth of an inch, are used to press and fold the chassis and lid. As a result the fit is perfect. There's similar attention to detail inside the chassis, where the thickest circuit boards we've ever seen are bolted down on metal stand-offs inside separate hi-fi style screened compartments. Panel components and valve bases are linked to these boards with flying leads in a perfect mix of PCB and point-to-point construction that has all the strengths and none of the weaknesses of these styles. Components are absolutely top-notch too, with metal film resistors, precision polystyrene capacitors and Nichicon filter caps the highlights.

The front panel looks deceptively simple with a pair of inputs labelled Rock and Roll, followed by knobs for volume, bass, treble and something Andy calls Attitude. On the other side of the orange pilot light a chicken head knob controls the UniValve's Hotplate circuit – a built-in power attenuator which lowers the volume after the output transformer. There's also a switch to take the Hotplate out of the circuit, followed by rockers for hi/lo voltage, mains and standby. On the back there's a single speaker outlet with switchable impedance, a variable output which can be switched from instrument to line level, as well as proper mains and line fuse protection.

There are two preamp valves and just one power valve. One of the UniValve's primary features is you can fit any commonly available power valve without rebiasing. You can also swap various preamp valve types with a minimum of hassle, which opens up all kinds of possibilities for tailoring gain, volume and tone to your own taste.

**SOUNDS:** The UniValve's single-ended design is pure Class A, unlike the quasi-Class A of push-pull designs like the Vox AC30 which step outside this mode as the power stage is overdriven.

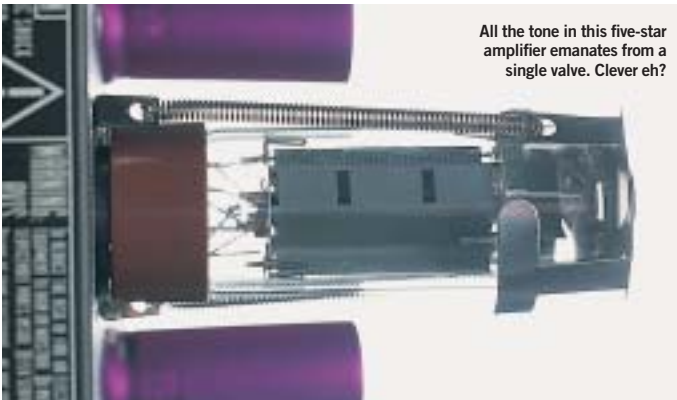
At low volume levels, and using the Roll input, the clean sounds are sweet and bell-like, with a chiming quality that may have you checking for a non-

### THD UNIVALVE HEAD TEST RESULTS

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

**WE LIKED** It's one of the world's best sounding, best looking and best made amps. More versatile than many

**WE DISLIKED** The current case format isn't best suited to live gigging, otherwise nothing at all. This is THD's masterpiece



All the tone in this five-star amplifier emanates from a single valve. Clever eh?

existent chorus pedal. Plug into the higher sensitivity Rock jack, and the gain increases for some seriously good lead tones. As the volume goes up, so does the distortion. This is a combination of pre and power stage cut-off, and the characteristic is heavily dependent on which power valve is in use. For example, the buzz-saw grind of an EL34 can be substituted for the focussed mid-range punch of a 6L6, the butter-sweet wail of a 6V6, or with a special Yellowjacket adaptor you can even switch to an EL84. The valve defines power output too: a KT88/6550 gave almost 17W while an EL84 delivers just 4W.

You also have infinite control over the level using the Hotplate attenuator, so you can drive the amp into meltdown at whisper-quiet levels. As the UniValve has its own built-in dummy load you can even unplug the speaker for total silence (don't try this on any other amp!). This is perfect for direct-recording or hooking the

UniValve up to another amp. The almost noiseless transformer-isolated line-out is the best we've ever heard, and it works equally well in slave or desk mode, delivering a dynamic sound that closely matches speaker output.

The orange light in the middle is a typical 'boutique' feature. It's part of a clever noise-reduction circuit that keeps hiss and hum at bay and glows brighter the harder you play. This is dead handy for recording, and if you find the pulsating light off-putting there's a useful off switch underneath.

With only a little practice, there's an amazing range of tone available. The Attitude control sweetens or hardens a note's attack, while the simple tone controls always seem to have just the right sweep, no matter how the amp is set up. The hi/lo voltage switch also has an effect on the tone, though its main function is to stop smaller valves like the EL84 and 6V6 from burning out.

The UniValve's features are obviously ideal for studio use, but can an amp

this small work live? Well, think about this: how far do you turn up the master on your 50 or 100-watt head? If the answer is less than eight or nine, you should hear just how loud a UniValve is at full tilt, even with just four watts from an EL84. Using a modern 4 x 12" fitted with high sensitivity drivers, this amp can easily cope with an un-mic'd gig, although clean headroom is somewhat at a premium, and the bigger output valves are more suitable if you want the amp to do anything more than full-bore distortion.

### Verdict

We're convinced that the UniValve is nothing less than a masterpiece. With its ability to use a number of different valves without rebiasing, not to mention the recording-friendly Hotplate feature, the versatility and range of tones is surprising. Almost everything we plugged into after using it sounded flat and one-dimensional by comparison. One of these amps and a handful of valves can deliver so much tone, you might think twice about that space-age digital modeller after all.

Nothing good is ever cheap. If you mention the phrase American hand-built boutique amp most people start to think of implausibly high prices, so to find out this superlative tone machine costs under £900 is almost too good to be true. Under our new ratings system a five star verdict demands something very, very special indeed – and the UniValve delivers it all, and then some. One of the best amps ever? You'd better believe it. **G**

### THD UniValve head

Guitarist RATING



### The rivals

Orange AD30R £829

Cornford Hurricane £1,199

Torres single-ended

amp kit £TBC

Cornford's new Hurricane is one of the UniValve's few real competitors, with an equally brilliant sound, but less flexibility. Orange's AD30R is one of the few mass-produced amps that approaches this kind of tone, although it can't compete for build quality and versatility. Torres' single-ended design is still in development, but may be the only other big single-ended design you can buy in the UK