



5 X 18 BRITISH CRUNCH BLISS

But since most of us do not get a chance to play in venues large enough to need a 100-watt amp, the search for (and popularity of) the classic 18-watt British amp has experienced a serious revival. One of the most prized of this group was the original Marshall 2061, made in fairly small numbers from 1968 to '73. Three decades later, finding an unmolested example in working (never mind *good*) condition is a rare occurrence. Marshall recently reissued the amp, but a number of indie/"boutique" builders in the U.S.

For many guitarists, there just is no equal to the sound of a British amp, particularly when it's driven to distraction with the volume knob twisted clockwise until it'll turn no more! • Many of the most recognizable riffs, solos, and chord sequences in rock were recorded with a dimed volume control on an EL-powered amp as the primary effect. And there's no denying that the sound of icons such as Pete Townsend, David Gilmour, and a host of others playing through driven 50- and 100-watters is fantastic... in a stadium.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BOB DRAGICH

had their own ideas of how a dual-EL84 amp should be made.

Here are five amps that follow the general formula of a hand-wired head with separate cabinet producing about 18 watts. Generally, the power tubes are a pair of EL84s, with one notable exception.

Meet Your Makers

Roy Blankenship, who sent his Leeds-21, started his involvement in amp building when he was 16 years old and put together a Heathkit. "It was the only way my dad would let me have an amp I



could use to play in bands.” He combined the Heathkit with an extension cabinet for a film projector and had his first gigging stack. In 1991, Roy was selling auto-body shop equipment when an amp repairman friend, Dan Abell, needed an assistant. The deal was that Blankenship would work for Abell for a week without pay and if they didn’t kill each other, he’d get the job. Blankenship answered phones, wrote orders, and did other customer-related chores, leaving Abell to work on amps. After the first week, Abell said, “Wow, I’ve never got so much done,” and Blankenship spent the next four and a half years there, he says, “Without one angry word between us!”

Blankenship later served as production manager at Groove Tubes before opening his own shop in Santa Monica, California. From there, he moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where he met a group of local amp collectors who asked him to build Dumble clones. They later changed their request to something brown-Tolex Fender Deluxe. Roy researched circuitboard schematics, built two amps, and the locals freaked out!

Mike Zaite, better known as Dr. Z, was born into tubes. His father owned a TV repair shop in the 1950s and the Dr. spent a lot of time at the store. As a teenager, he would experiment with amps left by his bandmates when after-school rehearsal was over, “Unbeknownst to them!” Zaite chuckles. He went on to earn a degree in electrical engineering and worked in the medical electronics field for 20 years. In 1988, he combined his two loves – electronics and music – and made his first amp, which evolved into his Carmen Ghia model. Joe Walsh took the Dr. Z SRZ 65 on the Eagles’ *Hell Freezes Over* tour, and ever since, his amps have been in demand from studio and touring musicians ranging in style from country picker Brad Paisley to John Mayall’s blues blaster Buddy Whittington.

Val King started building electronic gear at the age of six when he completed his first crystal radio. “The thrill of having it work the first time hooked

me,” he said. Like Zaite, King repaired and tweaked bandmates’ amps in high school. “I experimented with everything – tubes, transformers, you name it. I always wondered what would happen if I took the tubes or transformer out of one amp and put it in another.” Along the way, he noticed that hand-wired amps, which were meant to last for years, were mounted on turret boards, and his test equipment, which was built to last for decades, was constructed using terminal strips. He decided to build an amp using terminal strips, and five years ago designed the Uptown 33, with the Tigerhund 18 following shortly thereafter.

Bill Jansen, of Reeves Amplification, came into the amp-building business from a different angle. While the others dug into electronic gear from childhood, Jansen came at it from a business point of view. He had been importing amplifiers but was not always happy with inconsistencies in their quality. He also found himself at the mercy of the currency exchange rate, and decided to build amps in-house.

Steve O’Boyle, of Ugly Amps, started converting tube P.A. gear into guitar amps because it was an inexpensive way to get a vintage tube amp compared to vintage guitar amps. “And it was a lot of fun,” he said. O’Boyle built his first amp, the Whirley, in 2001. It had a dual-6V6 power section from a Wurlitzer organ and a preamp he “built out of nowhere.” While walking through a jungle of semi-assembled/disassembled amps in his shop, O’Boyle mumbled something about, “There’s an ugly amp... and there’s an ugly amp. And there’s another ugly amp,” when his brother blurted out, “Ugly Amps dot com!” The Ugly Amp company was born.

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Among these five amplifiers, the Blankenship bears the greatest visual and sonic resemblance to the Marshall – the knobs, faceplate, script, covering, grillecloth – all could have come from the Marshall factory. And like the Marshall,

it has two channels with two inputs each, and a single Volume and Tone knob per channel. Doesn’t get much closer. The one addition that stands out compared to the Marshall reissue is the tube-driven tremolo.

The Blankenship cabinet is loaded with a Celestion Blue, a 12” 8-ohm speaker highly regarded among builders and players.

Dr. Z is arguably the most well-known builder in this group, and for years has been supplying amps to big-name studio and performing musicians. The MAZ Junior NR has the requisite duo EL84s, along with a pair of ECC83 preamp tubes and an extra 12AX7. Its single channel has Hi and Lo inputs, with a standby switch. The MAZ offers the second-most tone-shaping options of the group, with controls for Volume, Treble, Middle, Bass and Gain, as well as a Cut knob for rolling off treble.

The accompanying speaker cabinet was fitted with Celestion G12-H and a G12-65 speakers, both 16 ohms and wired in series.

The King Amplification Tigerhund-18 was the exception to the rule in a few ways. First, instead of EL84s, King used an all-American tube lineup – a pair of 6V6s preceded by an ECC81, an ECC83, and a 7025 in the preamp stage.

Unlike most hand-wired amps that use boards of one sort or another to anchor the components, King amps are made using terminal strips, and the inherent sturdiness is apparent to anyone who looks at its chassis. King also sent a 1x15” speaker cab with a Vintage Jensen ceramic speaker.

With the Reeves Custom 18, it’s back to EL84s and a trio of 12AX7s up front. It offers not only the most tone-shaping possibilities of this group, but more than most amps, period. Reeves augmented the dual-input single channel with Treble, Middle, Bass and Gain knobs, an extra one called Drive that operates as the volume control, and a treble Cut knob. The most distinctive control is marked Power Scale, which controls

the amount of power to the tubes. With switches for Bright and additional Gain, if you can’t nail your sound with this one, it’s probably not a sound anyone else wants to hear!

The cabinet Reeves sent went the 2x12” route, with a pair of their signature Vintage Purple speakers made by Eminence.

If the Reeves has too many knobs for you, the Ugly-18 may be just what you’re looking for. Its four inputs and two channels are very similar to the Marshall, but the Ugly drops one knob off the second channel in the firm belief that a Volume control and your hands should be sufficient.

The Ugly cab, like the head, is the lightest of the group with a single 12” 8-ohm Eminence Red Coat Wizard.

The amps share a number of attributes; they’re all hand-wired and extremely quiet, indicating carefully selected and assembled components. All except the Reeves have standby switches, each allows the player to select 4- or 8-ohm impedance; the Blankenship and Reeves heads also let you run a 16-ohm cab. And it may or may not be significant, but everyone with the exception of Blankenship chose JJ power tubes, whether they were EL84s or 6V6s.

Sounds

Each of the amps was tested with the three most common pickup types – true single-coils, P-90s, and humbuckers. Unless otherwise noted, the tone knob(s) were in the mid position in an effort to keep coloration of the tone to a minimum. If a number appears indicating a knob position, it’s on a scale of 1 to 10, with 5 being the midpoint (*not* “o’clock” positions). Here are some notes on the sonic qualities of each amp.

Single-Coils

For this comparison, we used a set of DeTemple Sweet Spot guitars that, while having the sonic attributes we all look for in a Fender Stratocaster, also offer **continued on page 126 ...**



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perfectly balanced output from the neck, middle, and bridge pickups.

With the Blankenship Leeds-21, the neck pickup was particularly lively, the treble rose above a substantial midrange that made the pickup sound like a good middle-position unit. The bridge pickup started with a crisp, Telecaster-like country sound, and when the guitar's Tone knob was backed off, the upper mids remained in full force. Bridging the two channels provided a substantial distortion for a lower-gain amp. Personal Favorite Tone (from here on, "PFT"): bridge pickup, guitar Tone on 6, channels jumped, channel 1 on 7, channel 2 on 8 made crisp but chunky chords with enough sustain for leads.

The Dr. Z MAZ Junior NR revealed a warm but clear neck pickup, with the middle pickup particularly bright in tone. The bridge pickup responded very well to the Cut knob on the Z, reducing the edge while maintaining brightness. The MAZ Junior NR can get into distortion that borders on fuzztone using the High input and the Volume on 10, even with single-coils. PFT: middle pickup, Low input, Cut off, Volume at 8 gave warmth with just the right amount of edge.

King Amplification's Tigerhund 18 provided the American sound of the group, courtesy of its 6V6s. Great note clarity in the bridge position, and the cluck in the notch 2 and 4 pickup selector positions was the best of the group. Headroom was great, and, with the Volume dimed, the Master had to be at 6 or more to get decent sustain, which was the point of PFT for this amp. Because of its clarity of tone, the King was very pedal-friendly, and the manufacturer makes it easy to use pedals via the send and receive loop, which has separate Volume controls for both In and Out on the signal.

The most versatile in terms of distortion is the Reeves Custom 18, courtesy of its Power Scaling function. This knob allows the player to alter the amount of power going to the power tubes. The Custom 18 can hit total saturation at a little more than a whisper and maintain the same tones up to a roar, even with single-coils. In fact, with the Gain Boost switch, the Reeves can go into territory that mid-'60s fuzz boxes could only dream of. With single-coils, the Reeves could get quite loud by keeping the Gain low, the Gain switch off, diming the Power Scaling, and just dialing up the Drive (volume). In many cases, adding knobs and switches to the signal path can kill tone, but not so with the Reeves. The single-coils had great shimmer without harshness, and the bass was abundant. PFT: bridge pickup, Low input, Gain at 3, Drive at 6, Bright and Gain switches off, Cut at 6.

The Ugly 18-watter had great chime even with the neck pickup. Using one of the Normal inputs, turning up the Volume produced a rounder tone with

a bit of edginess, but nothing that would approach "fuzz." The bridge pickup had a nice, singing sustain, but sounded best with the Tone knob on the guitar turned back to 8. Notch 2 on the pickup selector switch was very clear and bright. The Bright channel is much louder than the normal channel, and it gets into the "grind" segment of the tonal spectrum much earlier. Bridging the two channels had the expected increase in gain, with the Bright channel becoming dominant in tone.

P-90s

For the P-90 part of the evaluation, we used a Gibson Custom Shop 1960 Les Paul Special reissue with a stop tailpiece and a Rio Grande Jazzbar in the neck position with a Bluesbar in the bridge. The Rio Grandes are a real favorite because they have all the snarl

and bite of a great set of P-90s with an unusually robust midrange.

The Blankenship Leeds-21 had nice clarity at low volume but really started to sing when turned up. Turning the Tone knob up a little when the neck pickup was being pushed helped with clarity, while the bridge pickup was clear no matter how far the Volume knob on the amp went up. Bridging the two channels got the distortion going earlier on the Volume dial, and provided more fullness at lower volume settings.

The Cut control on the Dr. Z proved its effectiveness during the P-90 tests. The amp's Gain control *does* allow the amp to get into heavily saturated distortion, and using the Cut let us dial out that little bit of rasp that can show up with a driven bridge pickup.

The result was a really smooth, but biting, lead tone.

One other thing that showed up with the Z was a tremendous amount of low-end response, courtesy of its dual 16-ohm 12" speakers. But bass is like money – it's a lot easier to end up with less than to get more, and a simple turn of the Bass knob smoothed out the tonal spectrum. After the adjustment, using both the bridge and the neck pickups simultaneously got a really nice, brighter humbucker sound.

The King Tigerhund, true to its 6V6s, had lotsa bite with the bridge pickup and the glass-on-steel sound of a really good single-coil with the neck pickup, with a lot more horsepower. While the 15" speaker promised mondo bass, it just didn't happen. What the speaker did do is move a lot of air, and even at low volume the room was filled with

	Blankenship AMPLIFICATION	Z	King Amplification	REEVES	Ugly Amps
Model:	Leeds-21	MAZ Junior NR	Tigerhund 18	Custom 18	Ugly-18
Pre-Amp Tubes	3x12AX7	2xECC83, 1x12AX7	1xECC81, 1xECC83, 1x7025	3x12AX7	2x12AX7
Pre-Amp Tubes, Supplier	Electro-Har- monix (EH)	JJs, Sovtek	JJs, RCA	GE, Tung Sol, Baldwin	EH
Power Tubes	2xEL84	2xEL84	2x6V6	2xEL84	2xEL84
Power Tubes, Supplier:	Groove Tubes	JJs	JJs	JJs	JJs
CONTROL PANEL					
Channel(s)	2	1	1	1	2
Inputs	4	Hi/Low	1	High/Low	Normal/Bright
Power Switch	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Standby	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Volume	2	1	1	1	2
Tone	2	N	N	N	1
Master or Gain	N	Y	Y	Y	N
Treble	N	Y	Y	Y	N
Middle	N	Y	Y	Y	N
Bass	N	Y	Y	Y	N
Treble Cut	N	Y	N	Y	N
Other	N	N	N	Drive, Bright & Gain	N
BACK PANEL					
Ohm Selector or Outputs	4,8,16	4,8	4,8	4,8,16	4,8
Line In/Out:	N	Y	Y	N	N
Extension Speaker Out	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Speaker Size	12"	2x12"	15"	2x12"	12"
Speaker Ohms	8	2x16	8	2x16	8
Speaker Manu- facturer:	Celestion	Celestion	Jensen	Eminence	Eminence
Speaker Model	Blue	G12H, G12-65	Ceramic	Vintage Purple	Red Coat Wizard
Dimensions, Head (width x height x depth, inches)	20x8x8.5	19.25x9.25x9.5	22.5x10.5x10	26x9x8.5	21x9x9
Dimensions, Cabinet	24x20x9	19.25x27.5x13.5	22.5x10.5x10	27x20.25x11.25	20x20.25x11
Weight, Head (lbs.)	23.8	28.4	32.4	25.8	18.4
Weight, Cabi- net (lbs.)	32.4	61.8	39.0	62.0	33.0
Price, Head	\$1595	\$1199	\$1750	\$1599	\$849
Price, Cabinet	\$595	\$779	\$395	\$695	\$300

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music. The cab had the tonal spectrum of a really big 12". The King stayed relatively clean with the P-90s compared to the other amps, and it was easy to get an abundance of headroom by keeping the Volume under 5 and just turning up the Master.

The Reeves Custom 18 gave a very round sound with a pronounced midrange with the bridge pickup, even with the guitar's Tone control on 10 and the amp's Cut rolled completely off. The PFT on the Reeves was bridge pickup into the High input, Cut off, Gain at 4, Drive at 4 and the Bright and Gain switches off. The neck pickup was extremely warm and showed that the Reeves amp, running clean, would make a very good jazz amp.

Similarly, the Ugly-18 revealed a Joe Pass side to the neck P-90, with a warm and round bass response. The amp could be turned up with the neck pickup selected and still be fairly clean. The Bright channel offered more edge but still did not break up in a significant way with neck pickup.

Using the pickups together produced a very clear but still distinctly single-coil tone. The bridge pickup had a generous amount of bite and brought out more upper-mids than lower-mids in the Bright channel.

Humbuckers

For this test, a Steinberger Spirit headless guitar was drafted into service. The mass of the Steinberger's thick body offers excellent sustain, and its DiMarzio Virtual Vintage humbuckers offered great tones – remarkably open and airy – and exemplary of the sort of humbuckers that single-coil enthusiasts can easily live with. Also, having great tone in such a compact package would make it possible for its owner to board a plane and fly anywhere in the world to take over lead guitar chores should, say, Bono and The Edge have a falling out. Or something like that.

The Blankenship Leeds-21 figured out what the DiMarzios were trying to do right away and kept the tone light and open. Low-end was sufficient, but not thunderous. The bridge pickup had excellent treble attack with this amp, and sounded a lot like a hot-rod P-90. Driven hard, the amp gave nice sustain that maintained the highs and was devoid of raspiness.

The Dr. Z easily produced nice, chimy clear tones with the humbuckers by keeping the Volume at 5 or less and turning up the Master. This amp delivered surprising clarity and note separation at full volume, even with the neck pickup. The Cut control was very useful while driving the bridge pickup hard, and made all the difference between raspy and singing sustain.

Through the King Tigerhund, the bridge DiMarzio had unreal clarity and, if necessary, could do a decent Telecaster imitation. The neck pickup was bright and clear, almost like it



(TOP TO BOTTOM) Blankenship Leeds-21, Dr. Z MAZ Junior NR, King Amplification Tigerhund 18, Reeves Custom 18, and the Ugly 18-watter.

was a Strat middle pickup with more mids. With the Volume dimed, the Master had to be at 6 or above for good sustain. At that point, the sustain was warm and slightly gritty. For that American/just-barely-out-of-control distortion, the King could not be beat. A neat trick with this amp is to put a volume pedal between the Input and Output of the effects loop. Using the pedal and the separate volume controls for the Input and the Output, it was easy to vary distortion on the fly.

With the humbuckers, the Reeves was off and running. And while it showed a remarkable range of distortion with the P-90s, it was nothing compared to what happened when it was introduced to the DiMarzios. It was possible to get a clean tone using the Low input and the Drive and Gain set at 4 each with the Cut knob and Gain and Bright switches off. The neck pickup delivered a tone similar to the guitar on Otis Redding's "Dock of the Bay." However, that's not what the Reeves really wanted to do in life. Any type of distortion – buzz saw, violin, aggressive attack – the Reeves yelled, "Bring it on!" The Cut knob was very effective in shaping the tone, and holding a note long enough to fly to Hawaii and get a deep tan! There simply wasn't enough time to discover all the sonic possibilities of this amp before the first Social Security check arrived.

This is where the Ugly amp leaves its own name in the dust, with a Normal channel that is very warm and round with the humbuckers. When bridged to the Bright channel, an earthy grind comes into play before halfway on the Bright channel's volume knob. When

bridged, the Bright channel becomes dominant. As the volume from both channels rise, the sustain starts to sear. If it's a little too much, just a touch of roll-off on the guitar's Tone control smoothed out everything.

The Envelopes, Please!

By now you're thinking, "Wait a minute... This guy didn't say anything bad about any of these amps." And you're right. Although each has a distinct voice, none of them did anything unusual or produced an unpleasant tone. But here are some standouts:

Most Likely to Terminate Your Residential Rental Agreement: The Dr. Z MAZ Junior NR, with its thunderous low-end and ability to thrust air, would be the weapon of choice to silence the loud drunk guy at the back of the club. This, combined with its richness of harmonic overtones that extends well into the high mids makes it the choice of many respected and well-known musicians in a variety of genres. Finally, Zaitz has been in business the longest of these manufacturers, and the head is the second least-expensive of the group.

Least Likely to Terminate Your Residential Rental Agreement: With its Power Scaling knob controlling the amount of power to the power tubes, the Reeves Custom 18 can produce the same tones in a bedroom or a very, very large club. There's no end to the exploration of tone, and the Reeves encouraged countless hours of turning dials and searching for guitars to plug in.

Marshall to the Nth Degree: None of these amps produced the sounds of

a classic 18-watt Marshall as closely as the Blankenship Leeds-21. The only differences were that the Blankenship had a smoother breakup and much better note separation. Also, it uses high-end Mercury Magnetics transformers (which the builder credits for much of its tone) and it costs a lot less than the Marshall reissue.

I'm American and I Want To Sound That Way: Anyone seeking the relatively low-volume power tube saturation of an 18- to 20-watt amp, but with a traditional American 6V6 sound, need look no further than the King Tigerhund. But, be forewarned – this amp is loud for its wattage. One bonus is the inherent durability of its terminal-strip construction, which also lets the builder easily sub in many of the primary tone-shaping components with simple alligator clips.

Being Able to Say, "This Costs How Much?!" But In a Good Way: Even though it has the lowest price of any of the combinations here, the Ugly-18 didn't have to apologize. Yes, it was lighter in part because the wood is not as thick as the others, but it doesn't give cause for alarm. More importantly, its tone was beguiling, and at the end of the day, when the tests were over and it was time for having fun, the Special's P-90s hooked up with the Ugly as often as any of the other amps – sometimes more. If you're on a budget and looking for an 18-watter, it might be a good idea to send Steve a check before he "examines his options," as they say.

For contact info on these builders, see the Dealer Directory in this issue. VG