

FENDER PAWN SHOP SPECIAL GRETA & EXCELSIOR £202 & £298
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPH BY SIMON LEES



The Rivals

Got a massive pocket full of cash? Amps don't come much more retro art deco than the **Trillium Seraph** (£POA) for more information visit www.trilliumamps.com. Back in the real world, the Greta falls right in the sights of the extremely capable **Yamaha THR5** (£199), which does a better job of the mp3 playback side of things, and has more sounds on board too. The Excelsior's closest alternative is the **Peavey Delta Blues** (£774), albeit 30 watts but with a 15-inch speaker and tremolo

Fender Pawn Shop Special Greta & Excelsior

£202 & £298

The big F shows off its retro side with these fabulous looking amps. But how do they sound? *by Mick Taylor*

One Thursday morning in January, bleary eyed after a long flight to California, the Guitarist team turns up for 'work' at the Winter NAMM show in Anaheim. First stop, Fender, and amid the flashy Custom Shop Strats and new Select Series beauties sit two low-ticket valve amps that have everyone talking. They don't say Fender on the front panels, and they look like relics from the 1950s – eh? Meet Greta (the little red one) and Excelsior...

Pawn Shop Special Greta

If Flash Gordon played the guitar, this would surely be the amp he had on his desk. The curved metal case and overall aesthetic scream 'vintage radio', with Fender quick to talk up the mini-jack input on the rear for plugging in your mp3 player, phone, iPad or what have you. The guitar input is on the back too, alongside a line

out jack for hooking up to a bigger amplifier and an 8-ohm speaker out that lets you hook it up to a bigger speaker cabinet for those times when the onboard four-inch special design speaker is not enough.

The front panel is blissfully simple: non-labelled volume and tone controls (you'll work it out soon enough) and a backlit, form-over-function VU meter, though we'd maybe trade that for a HF tweeter, because...

Sounds

When using an mp3 player, the audio playback quality just isn't up there with a reasonable made-for-the-job dock. That said, it does a far better job than you'd think possible from a mono, two-watt valve guitar amp and it does at least offer a quick and simple solution to playing along with songs.

Guitars meanwhile take on that old-school, tiny-amp, mid-range heavy projection you'd expect. Clean pickin' duties are

satisfying for noodling at home, while turning up the wick gets you into a wonderfully trashy, lo-fi overload kind of distortion that the likes of Dan Auerbach and Jack White could certainly find a use for. There's a surprising amount of range available from just the two knobs: in fact there's something to be said about just plugging in and going for it, rather than spending hours going through endless options and presets. Volume wise, you can have it cranked on your desk with little chance of hearing damage or neighbour complaints.

Plugged in to a bigger cab, the Greta really benefits from the extended low end and added sense of space. There's not enough headroom to use in a rehearsal situation, but for recording at home you could get a lot done if low-to-medium old-school drive is your thing.

Using the line out into the Excelsior (or anything else for that matter) can be great fun

too; you can get a full-on filthy distortion that gives a real amp-on-meltdown feel or, at the other end, a light boost into the front of your big tube amp.

Pawn Shop Special Excelsior

How. Cool. Is. That? Forgive us from coming over all retro-nostalgic but after the umpteenth black box promising ever more than the last, it is a tonic indeed to come across an amp that has no pretence whatsoever to being all things to all men. The irony, then, is that is actually is a great deal more versatile than you might think via its three inputs, two pseudo-Bakelite knobs, single tone switch, tremolo effect and 15-inch speaker.

The inputs are for, wait for it, guitar, mic and... accordion. Now, if you were in New Orleans, for example, that might not sound so strange. The dear old squeezebox isn't quite the musical leper in many parts of the world that it is in the UK. But will you ever use it for an accordion? Er, maybe. Can you plug your guitar into it? Well, yes – it's a weaker, duller sounding input, but that might give you a tonal option or two. The mic input has a bit more level; not as hot as the guitar input, but blow a harp into an appropriate mic, give it some beans and all of a sudden you're Paul Butterfield. Sort of.

Eventually to the guitar then. The Excelsior uses a pair of cathode-biased 6V6s to put out





a stated 13 watts. The totally open-backed cabinet looks the part from afar. Up closer the signs of cost-consciousness are there: thin plastic vinyl, a particleboard cabinet and a generally adequate level of finishing. Lest we be too harsh though – just look again at that bordering-on-silly price.

On the inside, it's very much modern Fender, albeit split with the preamp up top and the power section at the bottom of the amp. The circuits are simple, populated on PCBs with plenty of space – we can feel the soldering irons heating up now for all manner of mods that enthusiastic tweekers will bestow on their Excelsiors [while voiding the warranty and risking electric shock of course – Health & Safety Ed].

Sounds

Loud, is the first impression: the Excelsior would make a fantastic clean-toned home amp, but it's also plenty loud enough for small rehearsals and little gigs. The 15-inch speaker and open-backed cab help to create an immediate 'big amp'

feel. There's plenty of low-end, and a sense of air and spread that it's just not possible to get from a small enclosed cabinet. As a result, clean tones are very rewarding, especially when you add in some of the output bias tremolo effect. It doesn't do machine-gun stutters, instead it's a lovely vintage-type oscillation that works wonders for all kinds of Americana, blues and the like.

The bass/treble switch is a bit all-or-nothing; in the former position it's very dark sounding and in the latter adds both treble and a swathe of brightness. An additional rotary tone control like the Greta's would have been good, but in its absence, you can tame things from the guitar.

Headroom disappears quickly as you wind up the wick, and powerful pickups have the Excelsior driving soon enough. It's a vintage-style drive that can get right into the kind of messed-up, lo-fi worlds of Jon Spencer and the previously mentioned Messrs Auerbach and White. Would back to a lighter range of drives,

these sounds sit in countless genres from pop and blues, to soul and country. Will it be loud enough? That depends entirely on your bass player and drummer; in Fender terms it's much closer to Blues Junior territory than Hot Rod Deluxe.

Verdict

It seems that Fender's sheer might allows it the luxury, on a product or two at least, to kick back, chill and make something that's just cool – pure and simple. So while everyone else slugs it out with features and benefits in the low-end valve amp market, in come the Greta and Excelsior with no such pretensions. The premise is simple: loads of fun, not much money and both unquestionably hit the bullseye on that.

Improvements? Imagine the Greta, a third wider, stereo, with aux outputs and better mp3 player performance: we'd have that in a heartbeat. As for the Excelsior, Fender could use a more expensive speaker, heftier transformers, add reverb and a more upmarket ply cabinet to make it a tone-hound beast to compete with anything. Would you pay the extra £4-500 for it? It'd be a tough call. As it is, it gets 80 per cent of the way there for a ridiculously low price. In these times, that's the way to do it. **G**

Pawn Shop Special Greta

We like: Funky looks; mp3 input option; tabletop design

We dislike: The mp3 sound is rather lo-fi

Guitarist says: Lots of fun for jamming along with fifties and sixties drive tones – just make sure you try it with a bigger cab

Pawn Shop Special Excelsior

We like: Great looks; 15-inch speaker; tremolo effect

We dislike: All or nothing tone switch; uncomfortable carry handle

Guitarist says: The go-to amp for credible old-school Americana valve sounds on a budget

Fender Pawn Shop Special Greta

PRICE: £202

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Valve-powered combo with solid state rectification

POWER: 2 watts RMS

VALVES: 1 x 12AX7, 1 x 12AT7

CABINET: Metal

CONTROLS: Volume, tone

SPEAKER: 1 x 4-inch special design

FOOTSWITCH: N/A

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: VU meter, line out jack, 8-ohm speaker out, mini jack aux input (for mp3 player)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.95/8.7

DIMENSIONS: 255 (w) x 170 (h) x 185mm (d)

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: None

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Fender Pawn Shop Special Excelsior

PRICE: £298

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Valve-powered combo with solid state rectification

POWER: 13 watts RMS

VALVES: 2 x 12AX7, 2 x 6V6

CABINET: 17.5mm particle board

CONTROLS: Tremolo on/speed, volume, bright/dark tone switch

SPEAKER: 1 x 15-inch special design

FOOTSWITCH: N/A

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Inputs for guitar, mic and accordion, tremolo with adjustable speed

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 15/33

DIMENSIONS: 495 (w) x 535 (h) x 230mm (d)

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: None

Fender GBI

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Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★