

Fender
Deluxe VM

Peavey Vypyr
Tube 120

Group Test

Mid-priced Combos For The Road



Randall KH75

Randall

Marshall MA50C

Marshall



Flip the page to find out which one won our Group Test head-to-head

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You wouldn't go to war with a water pistol. You wouldn't take a tennis ball to a test match. And unless you want to be eaten alive by the mob, you wouldn't pitch up on the modern club circuit with your trusty five-watt 'Bedsit Baby' practice amp. With album sales down, but live music booming, the fledgling rock band of 2009 spends far more time on the M1 than kicking back at Abbey Road, meaning that a serious amp with gig-friendly features should be at the top of your shopping list. For this month's Group Test, TG is rolling out the big guns.

Of course, they've all got a bit of grunt, but with most serious live venues supplying a PA, that wasn't our only criteria. Instead of going for the predictable quartet of stacks, then, we've picked out four big-brand combos that will hopefully meet the other key demands of the travelling guitarist. Tone that will seduce the sceptics. Features we can get to work in the dark. Cabinets that will keep rocking when the lager starts to fly. Change from a £1,000 note...

First choice was the Marshall MA50C (£548), with an all-valve format that makes our palms sweat just thinking about it. Kirk Hammett's solid-state Randall KH75 (£373) starts the test as the dark horse, while Peavey's Vypyr Tube 120 (£645) would have us believe that it's big and clever. Bringing up the rear, the 'F' word is back, with Fender's valve-powered Deluxe VM amp (£665) facing a battle to justify its hefty outlay. Testing, testing, 1-2-3... ■

"WE'VE PICKED FOUR COMBOS TO MEET THE KEY DEMANDS OF THE TRAVELLING GUITARIST"

Gagging to start gigging?
Then you'll need a serious amp.
This month, TG lines up **four mid-dollar road warriors** that'll take you all the way to Wembley



Randall KH75 £373

Roar power

Cabinet ■ With its rugged cab and solid-state format, the KH75 is the toughest here

Reverb ■ It's hardly a knob-fest, but the KH75 has a classy reverb to add atmosphere



Gain select ■ You've got two channels, and also a choice of Kirk's rhythm and lead gain tones

At a glance

Randall KH75
TYPE: Solid state combo
OUTPUT: 75 watts
SPEAKER: 1x12" Celestion
EFFECTS: Reverb
CONTROLS: Channel, dual EQ, volume, gain select, gain x 2, contour, reverb,
SOCKETS: In, speaker out, FX loop, CD in, footswitch (included), phones
WEIGHT: 25kg
DIMENSIONS: (HxWxD): 545x 780x 353mm
CONTACT: Sound Technology 01462 480000
WEB: www.randallamplifiers.com

Yeah, we know: valves rule. But a solid-state Randall amp was good enough for Dimebag Darrell, and now it's good enough for Kirk Hammett's signature series, with the tube-free, wallet-friendly KH75 promising us all the blood and thunder of *Death Magnetic*. The only sticking point is that Kirk doesn't actually play one himself, preferring to luxuriate in the all-tube RM100KH stack. Hmm.

At £373, you can't expect the finery of Kirk's head (no plug-in



preamp modules here). Instead, we've got a loud, tough and straightforward combo that's a little dull until you fire it up. Clean has never been Randall's strong suit, and while it's decent, this channel is where you'll miss

the valves most; it just doesn't respond like the others. All is good when you switch to the dark side, though, with dual gain stages giving you: a) the thrashy crunch of Kirk's rhythm parts; and b) the brittle menace of his lead, bringing authenticity to your versions of Metallica's riffs.

Conclusion: Contrary to popular belief, solid-state does not mean 'lame': this sort of amp is just aimed at a different type of player. The KH75 might not be your dream choice for the

studio but it's perfect for the road, pumping out enough power to hit the back wall, delivering two watertight metal tones and soaking up more abuse than its pampered valve-powered rivals into the bargain. And if you're a young metallor gigging your way up the greasy pole, you might argue that nothing else matters.

SUMMARY

For: Exceptional value, versatile gain
Against: Doesn't respond like valves



TG says: Solid rock from Hammett

Peavey Vypyr Tube 120 £645

Super modeller

Stompbox dial ■ The Vypyr emulates an impressive 11 stompbox effects



Amp dial ■ The 120 does a valve-powered impression of 12 famous amps

Grille ■ It's expensive, but with 120 watts and twin speakers, it's an amp for life

At a glance

Peavey Vypyr Tube 120
TYPE: Hybrid combo
OUTPUT: 120 watts
SPEAKER: 2 x12" custom speakers
EFFECTS: 24 amp models, 22 effects, looper, 12 presets
VALVES: 6L6
CONTROLS: amp, FX, gain, EQ, volume, tap tempo,
SOCKETS: In, USB, CD in, speaker out, footswitch
WEIGHT: 34kg
DIMENSIONS: (HxWxD): 500x 660x 280mm
CONTACT: Peavey Electronics 01536 461234
WEB: www.peavey.co.uk

Amp snobs get confused by the Vypyr. They clock the amp sims, rack effects, stompbox mimicry and onboard looper, and dismiss it as another modelling amp for toilet circuit cover bands. Then they spin it round, spot the genuine 6L6 power tubes ablaze in the back, and start to drool uncontrollably. A digital front end with a valve power section – there's an idea.

First impression of the Vypyr: it's a riot. The presets make it



easy to get rocking, but there's also scope to tweak parameters, save bespoke sounds, set up a rhythm loop and jam along to it (though to get the most from it, you'll need £145 for the

Sanpera II footswitch). Second impression: it's *loud*, pumping a world-shaking 120 watts through twin speakers. Peavey doesn't specify what amps/effects are modelled, but you don't have to be a detective. Are they totally faithful to the originals? If you're a gear anorak, you might say 'not quite', but the man in the moshpit won't question them.

Conclusion: By the time you've got the amp and footswitch, the Vypyr is nudging a grand. It's

serious money, and players who know what sound they're after might do better committing to a more specialist amp. But for bread and butter giggers who don't want a 'trademark' tone on the road, this amp is well worth the wedge. In a less competitive test, it'd romp home.

SUMMARY

For: Fun, ace features, great tone
Against: Expensive, jack of all trades



TG says: Power and the glory

"MARSHALL'S NEW MA50C IS STRIPPED OF FRIPPERIES AND TRADES OFF ITS TONE"

Fender Deluxe VM £665

Tube screamer



Effects dials
The 'modern' aspect comes from the Deluxe's choice of four effects

Amp
The Deluxe boasts 12AX7 preamp and 6L6 power valves

Grille
With 40 watts through a 12" speaker, it's loud, but there's also a speaker socket

At a glance

Fender Deluxe VM

TYPE: Valve combo
OUTPUT: 40 watts
SPEAKER: 1x 12" Celestion
EFFECTS: Reverb, chorus, vibrato, delay
VALVES: 2x 12AX7, 2x 6L6
CONTROLS: Channel, dual volume, EQ, FX, delay/chorus/reverb controls
SOCKETS: In, speaker out, FX loop, footswitch
WEIGHT: 20.87kg
DIMENSIONS: (HxWxD) 428x 612x 236mm
CONTACT: Fender GB 01342 331700
WEB: www.fender.co.uk

Even if you could find a '65 Deluxe, it'd crumble into dust when your Transit goes over a pothole. Best to investigate Fender's 'Vintage Modified' model, which fuses all-tube innards with a fistful of digital effects. Fender sees it as the "perfect grab-and-go rig for club dates and weekend jams". Guess they haven't tried lifting it...

Mindful of Keith Richards' advice that Fender amps complement Fender guitars, TG strapped on a Tele and



was blown sideways by the class of the clean channel. If you've ever questioned the fuss that surrounds valves, five minutes immersed in this rich, shimmering, responsive tone will make you a card-carrying

convert, especially if you add a twist of the glorious reverb. Apart from chorus (still too 80s-sounding, we're afraid) the effects are top-quality and go some way to justify the test's highest price tag. But while the overdrive channel is magic for moderate rock, it doesn't quite match the warmth and whisky breath of the Marshall.

Conclusion: Every amp here has its strengths, and the Deluxe VM comes within a whisker of snatching gold with a clean

channel that makes you sound like a star, a small bag of top-drawer effects, and the second-best gain channel in town. There's nothing to criticise here apart from in relative terms, and for that reason, we're taking the unprecedented decision to award it five stars, even though it hasn't won. You'll see why in a minute...

SUMMARY

For: Mind-blowing clean channel
Against: Most expensive in the test

★★★★★

TG says: So close...

Marshall MA50C £548

Let's get loud



Channel select
You've got dedicated EQ for each channel, and a footswitch to select them

Crunch Balance
This control creates a pseudo third channel between the OD and Boost gain settings

Gain dial
There's no sweeter sound in rock than valves being pushed into the red



At a glance

Marshall MA50C

TYPE: Valve combo
OUTPUT: 50 watts
SPEAKER: 1x 12" speaker
EFFECTS: Reverb
VALVES: 3x ECC83, 2x EL34
CONTROLS: Channel, dual EQ, boost, gain, crunch balance, reverb, resonance, presence, power, standby
SOCKETS: In, speaker out, FX out, footswitch
WEIGHT: 22.7kg
DIMENSIONS: (HxWxD) 510 x 635 x 270mm
CONTACT: Marshall Amplification 01908 375411
WEB: www.marshallamps.com

Godfather Of Loud, Jim Marshall, could just build stacks for rock's glitterati, but he hasn't forgotten the little man, envisaging the MA Series as "simple, road-worthy, all-valve amps for budget-conscious guitarists". The MA50C combo is built in Vietnam to save costs, while retaining the classic dual-channel format.

You can always tell a great valve amp: it has zilch features. Aside from boost, reverb and resonance/presence dials, the



MA50C is stripped of fripperies and trades off its tone. Tested clean with a humbucker guitar, it has a punchy, full-body sparkle. But the overdrive channel is where it excels; the pairing of

ECC83/EL34 valves gives a classic roar that's warm and ragged, and maintains searing clarity for solos, especially with the boost. The key difference between valve and solid-state is that here, the tone comes from your hands, with the MA50C bringing mood to your playing.

Conclusion: An all-valve Marshall is a schoolboy fantasy, and the MA50C makes it flesh. The Peavey is cleverer, the Randall costs less, and the

Fender has the superior clean channel, but this is the perfect choice for firing out Zeppelin riffs and bottom-heavy blues. The only criticism? Marshall's claims of 'modern metal' aren't quite delivered on; if you want to sound like Slipknot, you might need to try an outboard pedal.

SUMMARY

For: Classic Marshall gain, great value
Against: Distortion could be heavier

★★★★★

TG says: Winner by a nose