



PHOTOGRAPHY NEIL GODWIN

112 **Guitarist** SUMMER 2007



EVH 5150 III head & cab £1,299 & £649

The latest amp to bear the 5150 name is designed by Edward Van Halen, but this time around it's built by Fender, and that's not the only difference *by Simon Bradley*

As with all new products associated with Edward Van Halen, we've been itching to try the new 5150 III that we first heard at the Winter NAMM show earlier this year. Like Van Halen's replica Frankenstein guitar, the amp, while put together by Fender, appears under Edward's own EVH brand. In fact the amp was designed at Fender's Scottsdale, Arizona, HQ and built at the facility in Ensenada, Mexico. Of course, it's been produced to Van Halen's exact specifications and requirements: no small recommendation.

Although two previous incarnations of the amp were released by Peavey (along, of course, with the Wolfgang guitar) it's actually Edward Van Halen himself who controls the 5150 name. And this is no reissue under a different brand – there are several features that are all new.

The amp features a full octet of 12AX7 preamp valves alongside a quartet of 6L6 power valves and produces 100 (rather than 120) watts of output – the three channels each have their own presence control.

Such things as both top and side-mounted handles can make all the difference when lugging the amp in and out of venues, and the slightly oversized associated 4 x 12 cab is loaded with four Celestion G12EVH speakers, designed from the ground up in Ipswich.

You can read more about that in our chat with Eddie himself and his manager Matt Bruck (see boxout on page 116), so let's get straight on with how it performs.

SOUNDS: Initially opting for a quick switch around the channels immediately shows that the three on



We especially liked the white control knobs – there's an all-white version available too

offer can give very different styles and intensities of tone. We'd hesitate to call channel one 'the clean channel', but it's here that the best non-overdrive tones are found: channels two and three have little or nothing in the way of clean tones.

To be honest, it's an unremarkable clean tone in that it lacks the sparkle, open-back presence and 'roominess' of a quality 2 x 12 combo, for example. Also, while there's a lot of volume on tap, there's also a lack of clean

headroom once you hook up to the 100-watt cab: these aren't super loud, clean sounding speakers, designed instead to give their own break-up and colouration to the tone. That might prove to be restricting for certain uses but, let's be honest, if you want an amp primarily for clean tones you're reading the wrong review.

Flicking to channel two and turning both gain and volume controls all the way up, you have a tone that's full of drive and body aplenty. The provision

EVH 5150 III
PRICE: £1,299
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Three-channel, all-tube head
OUTPUT: 100W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 260 (h) x 755 (w) x 293mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 55/121
VALVES: Four 6L6, eight 12AX7
CABINET: Premium birch ply
CHANNELS: Three
CONTROLS: Gain, low, mid, high, volume and presence for each channel
FOOTSWITCH: Four-button included
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Two speaker outs, mono effects loop, preamp out, impedance selector, rear-mounted power and standby switches, top and side-mounted handles
OPTIONS: Available in black (as reviewed) or ivory textured vinyl
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.evhgear.com

EVH 5150 III 412 CAB
PRICE: £649
ORIGIN: Mexico
RATING: 100W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 762 (h) x 743 (w) x 355mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 40/88
CABINET: Premium birch ply
SPEAKERS: Four Celestion G12EVH 12-inch
OPTIONS: Available in either black (as reviewed) or ivory textured vinyl, but only in a straight configuration; pop-out castors included



Channel three is where EVH's 2007 version of his legendary 'brown sound' can be found – the perfect rhythm and lead tone for rock

→ of independent presence controls for each channel comes into its own here, because different gain settings require different presence settings, such is the interactive relationship between the gain, treble and presence pots. Being able to cut treble and boost presence, or vice versa, is a quick route to fine-tuning your tone without any compromise between channels.

Back off the gain to around four and reset the EQ and the tone cleans up enough to be almost Fender-y in nature – albeit akin to a Blackface fit to burst. The amp is very responsive to manipulation of your guitar's volume too, so make sure you ride that volume pot to get the widest tonal and dynamic range from the amp.

Well, we've put it off for long enough: channel three is where EVH's 2007 version of his 'brown sound' can be found. We didn't really need to set the gain much past six at gigging volume to be able to revel in the perfect rhythm and lead tone for rock. Heaping further

EVH 5150 III HEAD & CAB TEST RESULTS	
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Plug in and play; independent presence controls; wonderful sounds

■ **WE DISLIKED** It's expensive; no global master volume; clean tone could be better

gain tends to cause the tone to mush up and it's here that you realise – not for the first time – just how good a player Mr Van Halen is. He's able to remain articulate at these levels of gain while, for us mere mortals – even though chords are sumptuous and lead lines tonesome in the extreme – string separation is sacrificed to a degree.

How many 5150 IIIs will end up in Ed's touring rig is open to question at the moment, but we'd probably use channel three for our rhythm tone and step on to channel two for our lead tone simply as the projection and definition here seems better. Also, when reducing channel three's signal via our guitar, we found the tone to be still too dirty, which isn't ever a problem with channel two. But three's saturated gain tones squash to an even greater musical manner than a Mesa Rectifier's red channel, while channel two produces a similarly attractive rock crunch tone, albeit more focused and slightly less compressed.



EVH 5150 III HEAD & CAB £1,299 & £649

GUITAR AMPS  CD TRACKS 10 & 11



→ Take it from us: this is like no other 'Fender' amp we've ever played.

It goes without saying that using a guitar with a medium-output humbucker in the bridge is when the amps sounds most authentic, but it's also perfectly possible to obtain a lovely bluesy tone using a Strat and channel two.

Verdict


It's not often that we come across a high-end amplifier made in Mexico, so it ought, judging by the price of Fender's Mexican guitars, to be good

news for your wallet. Well, that's not entirely the case...

Rightly or wrongly, there's still an added value to owning a US-made (or UK/European-made) amp, and we feel that, as the 5150 III head and cab is knocking the best part of two grand, this is going to be a tough sale to non-EVH devotees. You might rightly wish for more: tone-tailoring switches, a more powerful cab, maybe an overall master volume.

However, that's missing the point to a certain extent. If EVH doesn't require those features, then their inclusion

shouldn't be expected on his signature amp. Price may be an issue, but as with all signature products, you pay for the association of that artist – in this case a guitar legend.

The extensive R&D process involved in a project like this is laudable and has clearly benefited from the input of a man who still has one of the best rock tones of all time – a tone that's within the 5150 III's grasp. Maybe that's really all that matters. 

EVH 5150 III head & cab

Guitarist RATING



The rivals

Hughes & Kettner TriAmp II £1,295
Peavey 6505 Plus £999
Marshall JVM410H £899
Living up to the promise of three split-channel heads in one, the TriAmp continues to impress with buckets of tone, ease of use and sheer versatility. It also lights up blue, which is vital in the showing-off stakes! Arguably the 5150 III that never was, Peavey have unashamedly launched the 6505 amp based largely on features designed with Ed. This version features two channels complete with co-dependant presence and resonance pots, not to mention a crushing tone still used by some of rock's biggest names. Good price too. Boasting no less than four channels plus the full complement of MIDI interaction, the new Marshall head is a force to be reckoned with. Powered by the familiar team of EL34 and ECC83 tubes, there's reverb and a huge included footswitch too.

'Ed to 'Ed

In a Guitarist exclusive, we caught up with Ed and his manager Matt Bruck for the inside info...

What's the history of the EVH-branded 5150?

Edward: "[It's been] about two years, but (Fender amp guru) Mike Ulrich was not the engineer that I initially started working with on the amp. Once Mike came on board, after about a year, things progressed pretty quickly. Mike interprets me and what I'm after really well."

Let's talk tubes. Why did you opt for 6L6 power valves rather than EL34s as with the lauded Marshall?

Matt: "This is a continually evolving process and in earlier days, pushing an EL34 to the peak of its performance was the best that Ed was able to find. But, as the amp that he uses mutated in design, I think it's pretty obvious that he found the 6L6 suited his needs better. A lot of people draw a division between the sounds he's known for earlier in his career as opposed to the sounds he uses now, but the funny thing is, is that it's all his sound."

So why use as many as eight 12AX7 preamp tubes?

Matt: "Well, Ed certainly gave an inspiration for everybody to use more gain and that want is what speeded up the development and expansion of the preamp and preamp stages. Who said that all you should have was two 12AX7s and an inverter, you know?"

How did you test the amp?

Edward: "I tested every single aspect of the amp you can think of. More than anything, I use my ear and the 'feel' of the sound to know whether something is right for me. There are also some licks and noises that I play to see if an amp is responding the way I need it to. If it's not,

I know right away and it takes two seconds to know if it's doing what I want it to or not. Once I had arrived at a final version of the amp I moved on to crash testing: a polite way of saying, 'beat the living shit out of it'. I tried my best, but the amp never even flinched. I left guitars and basses feeding back at top volume, one foot in front of the cabinet for a month at a time, non-stop. We never even blew so much as a fuse let alone a tube or a speaker. The thing would not die! I did everything humanly possible to push the amp beyond its limits, only to find that there were no limits to the abuse that the

amp could handle. I'm really proud of that."

What guitars did you use in testing?

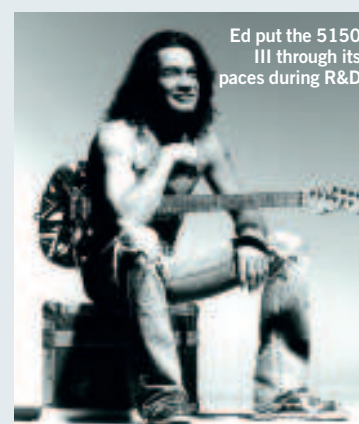
Edward: "I used my main workhorses primarily, my Frankenstein replica and

some of my new Wolfgang prototypes that I'm in development on at the moment. I also tried a lot of different guitars with different pickups and different configurations that I use for certain things. Also lots of basses from six-string baritones to four- and five-string models. Just about everything you can think of."

Can the cab handle the amp's output?

Matt: "Absolutely. I don't think there's any need for any extra headroom. The priority is tone and rated at 100 watts you're going to get a certain amount of compression and distortion from your speaker, and once we knew that a cabinet rated at 100 was the proper reproduction of Ed's sound, that was it."

"We went way over a dozen prototypes before we arrived at the final version and we tried different woods, construction method, grille cloths, the baffle angle and how it all affected the tone."



Edward: "The ultimate test for the cabinets is using the EVH 4 x 12 with the Celestion G12EVHs for bass!"

Matt: "We should say that Edward Van Halen is the first artist in the history of rock 'n' roll to have his own signature Celestion speaker: you've never seen the Eric Clapton Celestion, or the Jimmy Page, and everybody's used them. They're a great company and working with them was an absolute pleasure."

Will you be using the amps on the road?

Edward: "Absofuckinglutely! There is no difference between the gear I use on stage, in the studio or what's sold in stores. It's identical. I want to be able to walk into any store in the world that sells EVH brand products, grab what I need and go right onstage or into the studio with it. That's really important to me. I want people to have the ability to use exactly what I use. Otherwise, I'd just build a few for myself and call it a day. It's really satisfying to me that people can tell the difference between what I build and what other people build."

Thanks to Edward, Matt and Fender's Brian McDonald for their help