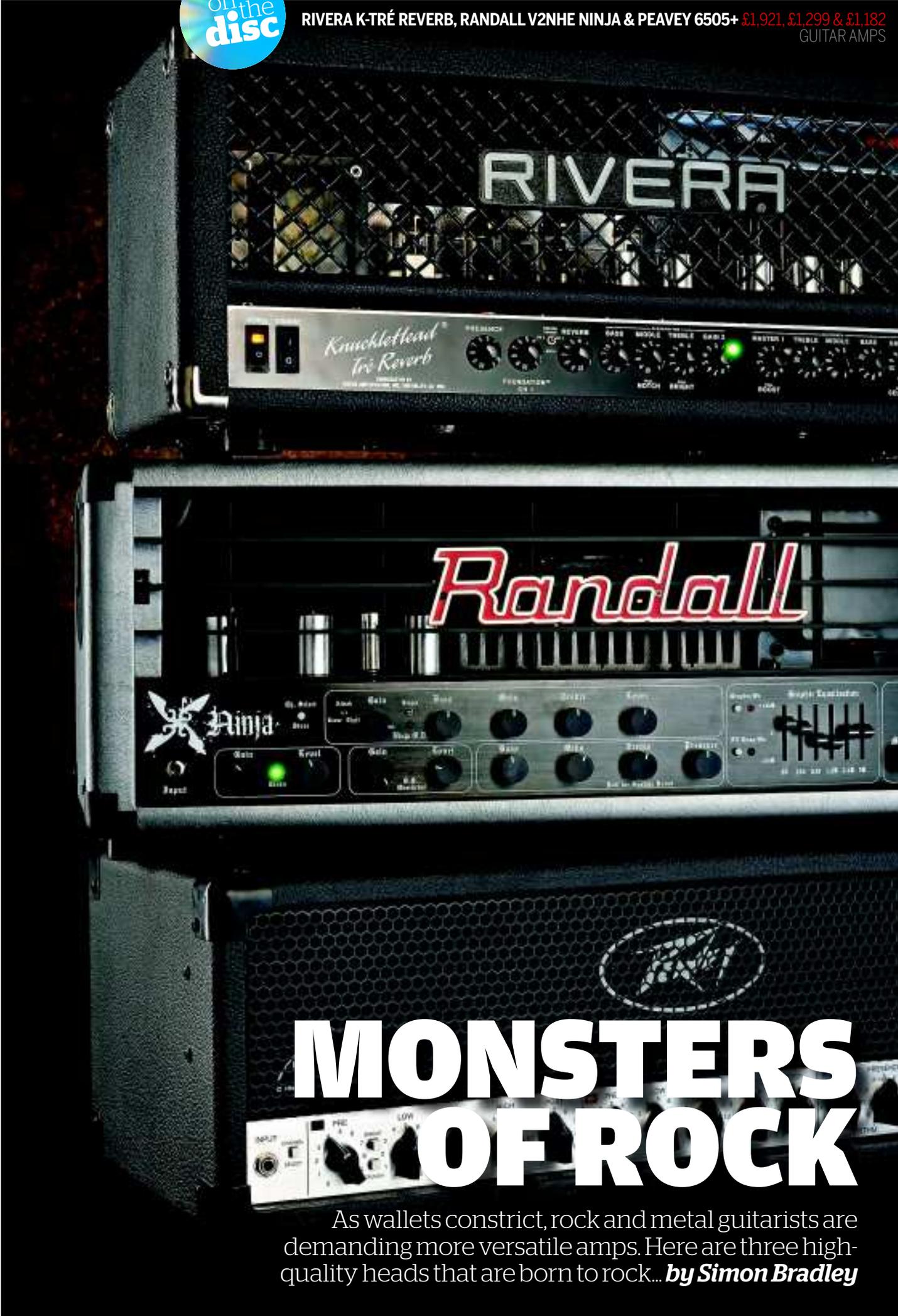




RIVERA K-TRÉ REVERB, RANDALL V2NHE NINJA & PEAVEY 6505+ £1,921, £1,299 & £1,182
GUITAR AMPS



MONSTERS OF ROCK

As wallets constrict, rock and metal guitarists are demanding more versatile amps. Here are three high-quality heads that are born to rock... **by Simon Bradley**



Rivera K-Tré Reverb £1,921

The reverb-loaded version of the Californian company's flagship amp boasts expansive levels of gain and a multitude of tone-tailoring options

Paul Rivera's lofty place in the development history of several classic

American amps is assured, and it's always a treat to plug into any model that hails from his Southern California facility.

The Knucklehead has long been at the top of the product tree and when we reviewed the reverb-less Tré back in issue 277, Paul himself told us that the main departure between the Tré and the original Knucklehead was the presence of "a rhythm channel that's a true rhythm channel."

Also intended to seriously increase versatility are the tone-shaping options that lurk behind three front-mounted push-pull controls. Clean/rhythm channel two (which is oddly the first you come across when scanning the panel from left to right) offers notch and bright options, while lead/crunch channel one has a pull boost and pull channel selector.

Each channel also has bass, middle, treble and gain controls, alongside channel one's master volume. There's no overall volume, which is a shame, but set to the panel's left is the master presence and a Foundation control for channel one. These features enable the

player to regulate the level of low-end response.

The reverb, which comes from a familiar three-spring tray, is controlled by a master level control alongside a three-way micro-switch for assigning the effect to each channel individually or across the board; it can be selected via the included footswitch too.

Rated at 120 watts, the amp's guts come from a set of four EL34 power valves – a vacuum tube more often associated with classic amps from good old Blighty than sunny SoCal. It seems that most rock players – from Blackmore to Van Halen and beyond – gravitate towards the aggressive drive character, tighter mids and bottom end produced by EL34s, compared with the cleaner, more blooming 6L6. However, the 6L6 is the source of the 'best' historically lauded clean tones, so it'll be interesting to see how this all pans out during our sound tests. In fact with so much tonal tweakery in modern amps, it's probably best to deal less in theory and just have a listen...

Sounds

On first impression, the amp seems to offer either a super-

clean or ultra-saturated tone, with not a great deal in-between. If you run channel one's gain control at anything over three, the crushing distortion scuppers any chance of obtaining a subdued performance. We found that setting the gain to two and using the boost to add additional girth was as close as we got to anything approaching a subdued drive.

That said, the crunch tone is truly awesome. Set the gain to six and slightly scoop the mids, and metal-style rhythms are present and correct, with all strings ringing as clear as a bell. The Foundation control is subtle, but does add a certain something in the bass end – though we found that we didn't move it from a central position once we began flailing away.

The amount of musical pre-feedback sustain is incredible too, although we'd have to say that using the boost simply adds yet more gain to the lower-mids, rather than providing anything approaching a useable volume hike for solos.

The headroom is huge, which carries over to channel two, and has without doubt among the best clean tones we've heard from a high-gain amp.

The notch and bright push/pull controls are your staunch allies here, and pulling both out and upping the reverb gives a wonderfully hard-edged, Fender-flavoured ching that's almost out of place here. Grab a suitable single-coil guitar and you could almost be playing through a Fender Twin complete with lush reverb, the 4 x 12's resonance making up for the EL34's fairly tight bottom end.

For metal-style clean tones, we'd suggest bypassing the notch and reducing the treble while leaving the bright on. Here you get more depth, yet continue to be able to really enjoy the high-end attack.

Verdict

This amp sounds exceptional. Its clean tones are worthy of anyone's attention, while the quality and ferocity of the gain will impress and inspire. The K-Tré doesn't do subdued distortion tones, but a good drive pedal through channel two gets around that issue. Not cheap, but very good.

The bottom line

We like: The clean and ultra-gain tones are nothing short of incredible

We dislike: Not very versatile

Guitarist says: This high-class amp arguably ticks just three tonal boxes – clean, high-gain and ultra-crunch – but it does each exceptionally well. With huge overdrives and even better clean tones, this is the real deal



Randall V2NHE Ninja £1,299

An even hotter version of the standard V2 designed by guitarist Michael Amott - offering red and silver livery and an ingenious approach to hybrid technology

Good guitar tone must always be about valves, right? Well if there's one genre that disproves that view, it's metal. Randall has long been lauded for its transistor amps and here we have a hybrid, utilising solid-state and valves for the best of both worlds.

All incarnations of Randall's V2 provide a trio of 12AX7 valves in the preamp, plus a further 12AT7 that works in tandem with a Mosfet power amp section to provide a variety of solid-state and valve-driven tones over three channels.

Channels one and two provide the solid-state tones, while channel three kicks in the 12AT7, technically providing a genuine valve-based sound. It's not as straightforward as that, though, and where Randall has got things right is that the Mosfet circuitry - dubbed Valve-Dynamic - has been well designed to work closely with the valve to give authentic compression, bloom and so on.

Channel three possesses its own three-band EQ plus attack and bright switches, while the remaining channels feature the added bonus of a push/pull Sustain Boost function.

Along with customary volume and presence knobs in

the master section is a Density control, enabling regulation of low-end speaker response. The front panel is littered with gothic script that's frustratingly difficult to read - the silver and red livery is damn cool, though.

A very smart feature is the provision of a six-band graphic that can be switched in and out at will via the included Randall footswitch. Parameters range from 80Hz to 5kHz and you can set it to taste; it's applicable to all three channels.

Finally, the V2 offers MIDI capability and the Store button located above channel two's controls refers to programs on other units - effects, for example - rather than relating to saving specific EQ and gain settings on the amp.

Sounds

The main concern here was how the solid-state and valve-driven overdrives would compare. We all know the tonal benefits of using valves, but a solid-state drive will sound the same irrespective of how high the volume is set, and there'll be a tighter attack too.

The latter feature is apparent as soon as we begin our A/B tests of the two channels we've set identically. For staccato

rhythm, the solid-state overdrive is spot on and, if you use the perfectly voiced Sustain Boost function to add even more gain, your chords and single notes have ample attack.

The Ninja OD - the name for the valve channel - is, for want of a better word, messier. There's more gain here, and it's certainly warmer, but it's also more difficult to control so we found ourselves backing the gain off a tad to clean things up in order to reduce the mush.

Of course, the level of note clarity is more down to your technique and the best option we discovered for classic metal was to set the extremely useful Attack switch to loose and bypass the Bright switch. Then, setting the graphic to an inverse scoop to boost the mids, you have a perfect option of allowing your solos to be heard: step on the footswitch for an efficient signal hike.

Any metal fan will tell novices that there's more to obtaining the right tone than simply setting the gain to stun and standing well back. The Ninja channel is extremely versatile and, if you experiment with the master density control and use the graphic wisely, it's possible to try out many differing

sounds. Consider Metallica, Alter Bridge and Slipknot: those bands all use wildly diverse crushing sounds and that level of versatility is apparent here. We'd wager that if you have a tone in your head, you'll get close to it using this amp.

The clean tone, while a little on the flat side, is perfectly acceptable without ever threatening the stature of the performance of the Rivera and, well, what's not cool about a silver amp that glows red?

Verdict

With components that are manufactured in China, and final assembly and QC taking place in the US, the Ninja is nicely priced indeed. Other V2 heads in the range - the Standard and Archetype - differ slightly in both price and spec, but all cover the bases we've discussed here.

This is an extremely versatile amp within what are traditionally narrow tonal parameters and, with this many metal tones at your fingertips, Randall really is spoiling us...

The bottom line

We like: Extremely versatile - perfectly suited to a vast array of differing metal styles

We dislike: The clean tone is a little flat; the dedicated 4 x 12 cab is expensive

Guitarist says: A successful mix of solid-state and valve technology reaps many tonal rewards. Tons of additional features make this Ninja one to embrace, not fight



Peavey 6505+ £1,182

The latest incarnation of the two-channel amp that gave Peavey its hardest of hard rock credentials in the mid-1990s...

Although the 5150-III has been launched under the EVH brand (and was reviewed back in issue 293), this is the latest version of the Peavey-made forebear. The first 5150 stopped players and amp designers in their tracks as it featured a huge number of preamp valves; a feature, so we assumed at the time, designed to recreate the 'Brown sound' squash when using 6L6 rather than EL34 power valves.

It's easy to underestimate the impact the 5150 had, but a quick perusal of the list of users illustrates just how versatile and popular it was: Ted Nugent, Aerosmith's Brad Whitford and, of course, Edward Van Halen himself, not to mention a litany of current metal bands.

The 6505+ differs from the 6505 in that, aside from a some significant layout changes, it possess an extra preamp valve – six rather than five (the EVH 5150-III buckles under the weight of eight 12AX7s) – but the look and character of the tone is intended to remain very close to the original.

It's divided into two totally independent channels that are each controlled by a three-band EQ, alongside pre- and post-gain controls. There's no master volume as such, but the two

channels benefit further from their own set of resonance and presence controls that have a profound effect on the overall bottom- and top-end response respectively.

The Rhythm channel also has bright and crunch switches, and the latter is switchable from the remote three-way, as is the channel and effects loop.

Round the back, alongside a mono effects loop, a non-calibrated preamp out and a pair of speaker outs, are a pair of valve bias terminals, which allow for quick and easy biasing should valve replacement become necessary. Unless you know exactly what you're doing in this regard, it's still best to leave it to a qualified tech.

We've always been attracted to the simple livery too. The line of chicken-head knobs and punched steel sheet look as cool as they ever did, and the simple LED displays enable you to know exactly where you are within the amp's infrastructure at a glance.

Sounds

Of the three heads, the 6505+ is easily the dirtiest, simply because high-gain tones are available across both channels. The second incarnation of the 5150 significantly improved its

clean performance, and here the rhythm channel, when modestly set, provides a tone that's certainly clean enough. However, the further the pre-gain control is turned, the hotter and edgier the tones become – and once the control gets past four, the result is dirtier than you may actually require for clean passages.

Utilising the Rhythm channel's bright switch does improve the clean tone, increasing cut and feel, but using the same settings on the crunch channel leads to an overly toppy tone – something not even the presence control can counteract. In fact, we found balancing a useable clean and crunch tone in a rock scenario is a struggle – using your guitar's volume will help.

The Lead channel has gain to spare and, for a huge metal rhythm crunch, set the gain to around seven. Set the very efficient resonance control to seven as well, and the sheer depth, aggressive overdrive and brutal tone in a single package is very musical indeed. It's possible for the tone to become too dense for a decent cut in solos – the crunch channel with the pre-gain all the way up is great for lead, in fact. Again, it's good to be friends with your

guitar's volume pot for maximum flexibility.

There's no getting around the fact that the milk float's worth of preamp bottles can make super-high gain settings a tad fizzy, though the dedicated presence control helps no end in rounding off those abrasive edges, or indeed adding cut if you need it.

That said, for that huge, on-the-edge-of-melting drive, compression and saturation, the Peavey does a cracking job. Plug in a maple-necked, bolt-on guitar with a Floyd Rose and a meaty humbucker and see exactly what we mean.

Verdict

The drive provided by the lead channel is great fun to play with – it's yielding to your pick, yet beats you about the face and neck like an angry drunk – just like the 5150s of yore.

It's worth taking time to sit with the 6505+ to get the right selection of tones, because a good clean and dirty tone at the same time can be a struggle. But hey, this is all about balls-out screaming. Who needs clean?

The bottom line

We like: Lead channel's extremely powerful wall of gain; resonance control's brick-busting low rumble

We dislike: Hard to get all the tones you need at once

Guitarist says: The dirtiest head here – the rhythm tone is what rock and metal players should aspire to. You'll need to sit with it to dial in your own tones, though

The rivals

Diezel's Herbert (£2,500) is a 180-watt monster with huge headroom, allowing for massive cleans and crushing metal tones. Their sporadic UK availability makes getting hold of one a chore though. The **Mesa/Boogie Triple Rectifier** (£2,349) is the definition of metal crunch tone. Rated at 150 watts and with eight wonderful modes crammed into three channels, you can't call yourself a rock and metal player until you've tried the Triple's Red channel set to modern high gain. Stunning. The **Diamond Nitrox** (£1,690) blew us away when we reviewed it back in issue 314. It's full of high-octane tone with an impressive clean option, while channel two's switchable dual master volumes make inaudible solos a thing of the past. Oh, and it glows as crimson as the slopes of Hell. **Krank's Krakenstein+** (£1,349) was designed in conjunction with late metal legend Dimebag Darrell, but offers a surprisingly versatile selection of tones thanks to a pair of 6550 power valves for each of the two channels. Switchable independent master volumes and a global presence control add to the appeal. The **Hughes & Kettner Switchblade** (£1,199) is unique in that it offers high-quality onboard effects from three separate digital processors. With a quartet of individually voiced channels, every facet of it can be controlled via the supplied MIDI stageboard for the ultimate ease of use. This is proof that digital technology can mesh seamlessly with the vacuum tube. **Marshall's 2203KK** (£901) is Slayer man Kerry King's signature valve head. It offers huge, crushing gain, smoothed and compressed by the of ECC83 and KT88 valves. That classic Marshall roar is still there though, and there's a shortcut to King's exact tone too, courtesy of 'The Beast' – a front-mounted EQ preset button.



Rivera K-Tré Reverb

PRICE: £1,921
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: All-valve amp head
OUTPUT: 120 watts
DIMENSIONS: 623 (w) x 253 (d) x 253 mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 22/48
CABINET: 29.5-33mm birch ply
VALVES: Five 12AX7, four EL34
CHANNELS: Two – clean/rhythm and lead/crunch
CONTROLS: Clean/rhythm: bass, middle with pull notch, treble with pull bright, gain. Lead/crunch: master 1 with pull boost, treble, middle bass, gain 1 with pull channel select. Master presence, master reverb, Foundation control for lead/crunch channel
FOOTSWITCH: Rivera FS-7E (included)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Mono effects loop, send and return level controls, FX loop channel assign switch, line out, reverb channel assign switch
RANGE OPTIONS: The KR100 Knucklehead head (£2,404); Knucklehead 4 x 12 (£960)
M&M Music
02380 339668
www.rivera.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Randall V2NHE Ninja

PRICE: £1,299
ORIGIN: Parts made in China, final assembly in USA
TYPE: Hybrid amp head
OUTPUT: 280 watts
DIMENSIONS: 713 (w) x 257 (d) x 247 mm (h)
CABINET: 29-32mm birch ply
VALVES: Three 12AX7 and one 12AT7
CHANNELS: Three (clean, overdrive and valve OD) with dual preamps
CONTROLS: Independent gain and level for each channel plus bass, middle and treble on overdrive and valve OD channels (latter includes independent presence control). Master section features master volume, presence and density controls
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: MIDI-assignable six-band graphic, push/pull sustain boost feature, attack and bright switches on Valve OD channel, channel select/store button, series or parallel FX loop, MIDI in and thru ports, XLR direct recording output, slave out
FOOTSWITCH: Randall RF5V2 five-way MIDI footswitch (included)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Parallel FX loop with send and return level controls, MIDI in and thru ports
RANGE OPTIONS: The standard ECC83-loaded V2 (£1,279) and the 12AX7AC5HG V2 Archetypal (£1,299). Randall RS412XLT100N cab (£929)
Sound Technology
01462 480000
www.randallamplifiers.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Peavey 6505+

PRICE: £1,182
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: All-valve amp head
OUTPUT: 120 watts
DIMENSIONS: 676 (w) x 298 (d) x 254mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 21.9/48.3
CABINET: 33mm
VALVES: Six 12AX7, four 6L6GC
CHANNELS: Two – Rhythm and Lead
CONTROLS: Low, mid, high; pre- and post-gain controls on both channels, with independent resonance and presence controls. Bright and crunch switches on rhythm channel
FOOTSWITCH: Peavey 6505 three-way footswitch (included)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Preamp out, mono effects loop, bias test terminals
RANGE OPTIONS: Standard 6505 head (£1,004); dedicated 6505 4 x 12 cabinet (£780); 6505 2 x 12 combo (£1,300)
Peavey UK
01536 461234
www.peavey-eu.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Final Thoughts

Each of our three monster metal heads will more than do the job, but which would we choose, and how can you achieve better metal tone?

We've said it many times in these pages and we'll say it again: as far as the quality, availability and affordability of gear is concerned, there's never been a better time to be a guitarist. Whether a specific amp or effect is designed solely for metal or it sets its horizons slightly broader, players irrespective of stature and skill can buy something that will give an instant metal sound.

Take Metallica – to get the tone that defined modern metal

for the Ride The Lightning album and tour, Metallica's James Hetfield used a Mesa/Boogie MkII C+ combo, slaved its preamp into a Marshall JCM800 2205 and still needed an Ibanez TS-9 to get the desired level of filth. If the band were starting off in 2009, he could simply buy one of these three amps – or, indeed, any one of the six Rivals – and have a great metal tone straight away.

You don't have to spend four figures to get a good metal amp, but to own a truly great unit – if

you're to buy both the head and 4 x 12 cab new – you'll need to budget well over £1,000. All three of our heads when bought together with their dedicated 4 x 12 siblings come in at close to – and the Rivera well over – £2,000, and each has a selection

of great tones that'd will shame more wallet-friendly options. Yes there are good inexpensive amps, but they're not in the same league as these.

If your amp's voiced correctly, then you can up the gain, slightly reduce the mids and wind up the low-end to get a great metal tone – something each of our three protagonists do very well indeed.

The Rivera's clean tone is genuinely second to none – it's even better than that provided by the Diamond Nitrox – and the crushing gain available from the lead channel is truly outstanding. It won't do a cleaner or more subtle drive,



Having these independent for each channel helps you dial those tones exactly

You don't have to spend four figures to get a good metal amp, but to own a truly great unit, you'll need to budget well over £1,000



The Randall's gothic lettering isn't the easiest to read, but it is very metal!

but what it does do it carries off with its flags unfurled.

If you're a fan of myriad switching options – as this writer certainly is – the Ninja provides a trio of different channels, the character of each of which can be changed by the footswitchable six-band graphic. With a clever approach to the knotty problem of a hybrid power section, the different styles of drive available from this one amp are very impressive.

Finally, the Peavey 6505+, which has at least one part of its legacy well and truly within the realms of a genuine classic design – the original 5150. Dirtier than a mud wrestler's vest and almost as difficult to deal with, this amp certainly requires you to think ahead as far as settings go. With a great rhythm and equally cool crunch setting, you can have both if you forgo a clean tone.

But a metal tone isn't just about gain, it's about the clarity and quality of the basic tone, before you even consider the application of overdrive. In that regard, we'd have to plump for the Rivera, simply because while it only does two tones they're of a truly high standard. That said, each amp is different and has many merits of its own. In short, they're all more than up to the task of providing a top-drawer metal tone, and more besides. **G**



The Rivera offers sublime clean tones



Marshall 1960DM £695

Got an amp? Now you need a 4 x 12 cabinet or two..

Megadeth's Dave Mustaine has been rather busy on the endorsement circuit of late, and his new signature Marshall 4 x 12 cabinet, launched at NAMM, is unlike anything the company has previously produced.

Although of the same dimensions as the classic 1960 range of cabs we've seen on stages for years and years, the DM is – of course – aimed at producing a tight and efficient projection that's perfect for metal tones. A quartet of Celestion G12-V30 speakers, each rated at 70 watts, provide the tone, while the wholly

closed-back construction and powder-coated, diamond-punched steel grille add a suitably metal aesthetic, as well as protection against any stray stagedivers or band members.

It certainly looks the business too, covered in a cloth that gives a sleek and very modern carbon-fibre effect.

We've tried all three of our heads through the 1960DM, as well as with their own dedicated 4 x 12s, and noticed that there was a subtle yet discernible increase in cut and projection in each case. You may find you'll lose a modicum of warmth too, but a simple EQ tweak cured

many of our misgivings and the depth of the crunching metal tone is full indeed.

The current price of a standard 1960 cab is £515, but for the 1960DM's additional cost you get a cool livery and a genuinely alternative sonic performance. It's worth consideration if you're looking to build the ultimate metal rig.

Marshall 01908 375411
www.marshallamps.com

The bottom line

We like: Cool looks; Vintage 30s offer a different tone from a standard 1960 cab

We dislike: Nothing
Guitarist says: With many quality US-made 4x12s coming it at nearly a grand, this is a good hard rock option

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Although of the same dimensions as the classic 1960 range of cabs, the DM is – of course – aimed at producing a tight and efficient projection that's perfect for metal tones