

Words: Michael Brown Photography: Joby Sessions

# MICRO AMP ROUND-UP

We whip out the TG microscope to put a quartet of big-name tiny-proportioned combos to the test, where size and portability are the name of the game





**HIDDEN** behind the onstage stacks, rehearsal combos and bedroom practice amps, you'll find the micro amp: a stripped-down piece of kit that looks good on your bookshelf and fits in your backpack for use at school/work or on public transport. These diddy combos remain popular among guitarists for low-volume practising on the move (not to mention raspy, broken-speaker-esque tones on recordings), and with a

number of renowned amp brands getting in on the act, we thought it was about time we rounded up four of the main contenders and put them to the test. Each amp packs a different range of features, from tuners to effects, but all four offer battery and power supply operation, headphone outputs, as well as overdrive channels and enough output to do a surprising amount of aural damage. Let's plug in and act like we're monsters of rock...





### MARSHALL MS-2 £30

Don't MS with a classic

**THE MS-2** is ubiquitous for a reason, packing two channels for a modest outlay. It sounds good, too: the cleans stay clean, and the tone knob's range keeps things from getting mushy or piercing. Plus, switching to the OD channel gives you a crunch that – while boxy and lacking in bottom-end – captures the essence of that Marshall vibe with a bridge humbucker for classic-rock riffs. The only snag is that the volume knob controls gain on this channel, and considering it sounds best with the volume up high, it could end up too loud for next door – you've been warned!

#### AT A GLANCE

**OUTPUT:** 1W  
**SPEAKER:** 1x 3"  
**POWER:** 9V battery, 9V power supply  
**CONTROLS:** Volume, tone, off/on/OD switch  
**SOCKETS:** Input, headphone output, power  
**WEIGHT:** 0.45kg  
**DIMENSIONS:** [HxWxD] 145x120x62mm  
**CONTACT:** Marshall Amplification  
 01908 375411  
[www.marshallamps.com](http://www.marshallamps.com)

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| SUMMARY        | FEATURES        | ■     |
|                | SOUND QUALITY   | ■ ■   |
|                | VALUE FOR MONEY | ■ ■ ■ |
|                | BUILD QUALITY   | ■ ■ ■ |
|                | USABILITY       | ■ ■ ■ |
| OVERALL RATING | ★★★★            |       |

“The OD channel captures the essence of that Marshall vibe”

### FENDER MINI '57 TWIN £59

Next of Twin

**UNLIKE ITS** namesake, the '57 Twin doesn't offer a lot of clean headroom; it starts to overdrive at pretty modest volume levels. The tones are responsive, though, and the 2x2 speaker configuration projects a sonic field with more depth than some single-speaker micro amps. Turn the drive up a little more, and your reward is spiky dirt, which transitions into gnarly transistor fuzz-type sounds at higher levels. We preferred the Twin with lower-output single coils to humbuckers, but there are some unique tones for sonic adventurers.

#### AT A GLANCE

**OUTPUT:** 1W  
**SPEAKER:** 2x 2"  
**POWER:** 9V battery, 9V centre-negative power supply  
**CONTROLS:** Volume, tone, drive  
**SOCKETS:** Input, headphone output  
**WEIGHT:** 0.68kg  
**DIMENSIONS:** [HxWxD] 203x229x71mm  
**CONTACT:** Fender GBI  
 01342 331700  
[www.fender.com](http://www.fender.com)

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| SUMMARY        | FEATURES        | ■     |
|                | SOUND QUALITY   | ■ ■   |
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|                | BUILD QUALITY   | ■ ■ ■ |
|                | USABILITY       | ■ ■ ■ |
| OVERALL RATING | ★★★★            |       |



**BLACKSTAR FLY 3** £49

**Fly-away tone**

**BUILDING ON** the already compact ID:Core series, the Fly 3 takes the micro amp concept and runs with it, packing three watts, two channels, digital tape delay and Blackstar's Infinite Shape Feature for British and American sounds. What's more, you can even buy an extension cab (£19.99) to create a stereo rig, which works brilliantly for playing tunes via the 3.5mm audio-in jack. It's the tone that makes the Fly 3 such a resounding success, though; it sounds as good as practice amps four times the size, with a meaty bass response, American-style cleans and hefty gain. Dialling in a touch of tape delay helps to enhance the size of the sound, too. A huge innovation in a tiny field.



**AT A GLANCE**

**OUTPUT:** 3W  
**SPEAKER:** 1x 3"  
**POWER:** 6x AA batteries, 6.5V power supply  
**CONTROLS:** Gain, volume, EQ/ISF, delay time, delay level, OD switch  
**SOCKETS:** Input, MP3/line in, emulated line out/headphones, power, extension speaker output  
**WEIGHT:** 0.65kg  
**DIMENSIONS:** [HxWxD] 136x171x101mm  
**CONTACT:** Blackstar Amplification 01604 652844 www.blackstaramps.com

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| <b>SUMMARY</b>        | FEATURES        | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
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|                       | VALUE FOR MONEY | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
|                       | BUILD QUALITY   | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
|                       | USABILITY       | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| <b>OVERALL RATING</b> | ★★★★★           |   |   |   |   |   |   |



**ORANGE MICRO CRUSH PIX** £38

**Pix and mix**

**WITH A** four-inch speaker, the Micro Crush sounds bigger than some of its rivals, offering a slightly fuller bass response, and it also includes a handy built-in chromatic tuner. While the clean channel's lower volumes provide a good platform for shimmering chords, it doesn't stay clean for long; turn up to 10 o'clock, and it breaks up for vintage grit. Switching to the OD channel yields a wild, loose crunch that's great for indie barre chords; but with no gain control, it's not especially versatile, so falls down a little on heavy rock and metal.

**AT A GLANCE**

**OUTPUT:** 3W  
**SPEAKER:** 1x 4"  
**POWER:** 9V battery, 9V power supply  
**CONTROLS:** Tone, volume, overdrive button, tuner button  
**SOCKETS:** Input, 3.5mm headphone output, power  
**WEIGHT:** 0.8kg  
**DIMENSIONS:** [HxWxD] 150x150x85mm  
**CONTACT:** Orange Amplification 0208 905 2828 www.orangeamps.com

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|                       | BUILD QUALITY   | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
|                       | USABILITY       | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| <b>OVERALL RATING</b> | ★★★★★           |   |   |   |   |   |