

FIRST PLAY



FRIEDMAN BE-MINI HEAD
£299

WHAT IS IT? Desktop-sized 30-watt solid-state head, inspired by Friedman's BE-OD overdrive pedal and the 'Brown Eye' channel from Friedman's coveted all-valve heads

Pocket Plexi

Friedman Amplification is known for its boutique hot-rod all-valve amp tone, so what can this affordable solid-state alternative bring to the party?

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

With nearly three decades of industry experience, amp designer Dave Friedman has the reputation as the 'go-to amp guy' for many top players (including Steve Stevens and Eddie Van Halen) and is no longer an underground phenomenon. As well as his range of highly coveted USA-made heads and pedals, he has his own brand of guitars designed in partnership with the legendary Grover Jackson.

Friedman's speciality is the 'hot-rodded Marshall' tone, a product of his own ears and sonic taste rather than a reproduction

of any particular circuit, which just happens to click with many of today's top players. While most of Friedman's amp range is valve, this new solid-state design is inspired by the all-valve Brown Eye 50 head and the BE-OD pedal, the BE-Mini. But can this pint-size head with its very affordable price tag (relatively speaking), really produce the same sonic magic as an all-valve, top-of-the-range Friedman?

Looking more like an immaculately finished scale model rather than the real thing, the BE-Mini is roughly a quarter of the size of a regular head. It weighs just a







1. The black knobs on a gold background evoke classic British designs from the 70s and 80s, while the controls make it easy to dial in any guitar for stunning supercharged tone

fraction of its all-valve equivalent because the electronics are solid state, and has an external 24-volt laptop-style power supply. The signature Friedman look of a black vinyl covering accented with gold piping and gold control panels pays tribute to classic British designs from the 70s and 80s and looks very smart.

Inside, the tiny ply cabinet is a robust open-ended steel-tray chassis, with a perforated square area over the output stage to ventilate warm air. There's one high-quality PCB, plus a separate PCB strip for the rear-panel sockets and a smaller surface-mount daughter board that holds the BE-Mini's Class D output stage. The minimal wiring is neatly tied back and routed.

This is a straightforward single-channel preamp design with a single input jack feeding controls for gain, master volume, bass, mid, treble and presence. There are

two small three-way toggle switches, labelled Cut and Tight, that help tailor the BE-Mini's response to individual tastes: Cut affects the range of the gain control, while Tight progressively reduces the bass response, helping stop flabby bass syndrome at higher gain settings.

Moving to the back panel, there's a pair of speaker outlet jacks and a series effects loop, together with the 24-volt DC power inlet. Despite the reduced dimensions, the BE-Mini exudes the same cool boutique vibe of its bigger brothers, and the overall impression is that, like all Friedman products, it's built to last and provide many trouble-free years of use.

Feel & Sounds

Despite a lack of valves, there's plenty of heat in the BE-Mini's wide-ranging overdrive channel. The supercharged Marshall sounds that Friedman is known for are here in abundance, ranging from mild-crunch classic-rock tones to screaming sustain and 'edge of the pick' harmonic squeals, ideal for the blues-metal genre, as typified by players such as Eric Steckel and Doug Rappoport.

2. The Cut and Tight switches both have three positions and work on the BE-Mini's gain range and bass response to optimise the sound at any gain setting

3. The BE-Mini uses a 24-volt laptop-style power supply, compatible with most international voltages, so you can use it practically anywhere there's a mains socket

4. The amp's minimum load is 8 ohms, making it compatible with a wide range of single- and dual-speaker cabinets. You can also plug in two 16-ohm cabinets using both output jacks for a total load of 8 ohms

The supercharged Marshall sounds that Friedman is known for are here in abundance

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The 24-volt DC power supply provides improved headroom and dynamic range, making it easier to accept the illusion that you're playing through a real valve amp, although we'd have to say that after an extended session with the BE-Mini, you can hear the difference when swapping over to a decent all-valve product.

There's no clean channel, or anything remotely close to a clean sound, which is okay because players who buy the BE-Mini aren't likely to use it for jazz or country gigs. At the top end of the gain range, it doesn't really matter what guitar you plug in; a Strat with averagely low-output pickups will sound more or less the same as a Les Paul. At lower gain settings, however, the BE-Mini is more transparent and you hear more of the guitar's character. With the Gain control around halfway and the Cut control on its low or medium settings, we found the most rewarding sounds.

The BE-Mini's tone controls interact smoothly and predictably. Used in conjunction with the Cut and Tight switches, it's quick and easy to dial in a great tone at any gain level. While the slightly compressed dynamics sound really good

3



4





The BE-Mini features a quality series effects loop; the send output can also be used for direct recording with the loudspeaker disconnected

when recorded, albeit with a little more hiss than we'd like to hear. Using a Sennheiser MD 421 up close to a Celestion V30-loaded cabinet (at volume levels low enough to talk over comfortably), the results were positively huge, creating a satisfying tone that sounded like a big hundred-watt head with everything on 11.

The BE-Mini's 30-watt output stage is also loud enough to use live when teamed with a suitable enclosure. The minimum recommended load is eight ohms, which makes the BE-Mini compatible with most single- and twin-speaker cabinets, while you can connect a pair of 4x12 16-ohm cabs using both output jacks.

Verdict

When it comes to delivering the supercharged British overdrive tone its larger siblings are renowned for, Friedman's BE-Mini is quite the animal, proving that analogue solid-state still packs a punch. There's also the matter of reliability and consistency – the best valve amps are only as good as the valves you put in them, and we're in an uncertain time with valve quality and long-term supply far from assured. There's nothing more frustrating

There's enough gain and EQ range to satisfy blues, rock and metal players at any level

than being halfway through a gig when a valve starts to let go and your signal is perforated by the sound of chips being fried while you lose gain and tone, something that will never happen with the BE-Mini.

Okay, there's no clean channel, but that's unlikely to put any prospective customer off, because the drive tones are gloriously mad, with more than enough gain and EQ range to satisfy most blues, rock and metal players at any level.

The money is eyebrow-raising, but this time for the right reasons: the BE-Mini comes in at less than a tenth of Friedman's all-valve Brown Eye 50 Deluxe head. Despite the fact it only has one channel and might be a tad too noisy to record without a noise gate, this is a proper USA-made Friedman, so the sub-£300 asking price will surely be all the justification many gain fiends will need. **G**



FRIEDMAN BE-MINI HEAD

PRICE: £299

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Analogue solid state preamp, Class D power amp

OUTPUT: 30W RMS into 8Ω minimum load

VALVES: None

DIMENSIONS: 240 (w) x 160 (d) x 135mm (h)

WEIGHT (KG/LB): 1.8/4

CABINET: Plywood

CHANNELS: 1

CONTROLS: Gain, bass, mid, treble, presence, master volume, 3-position Cut and Tight toggle switches

FOOTSWITCH: None

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series effects loop

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: None

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8/10

PROS Compact and very portable; superb overdrive tones; surprisingly loud

CONS No proper clean channel and slightly too much hiss for more demanding recording applications (a decent noise gate will mostly get around this); a strain relief for the power lead would be nice