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GROUP TEST

MICRO VALVE HEADS

These weeny wattage micro heads are so compact that you can fire your roadie. TG decides which pocket rocket to get onboard

FROM bra size to brake horsepower, modern life is all about the numbers. Trouble is, given that this Group Test is a smackdown between four micro valve heads with a power rating of two watts max, TG is braced for a backlash. Two watts? That's less than a travel kettle! You could run them off a hamster's wheel! Bring on the stacks!

The truth is, small heads have real benefits. First off, wattage isn't the only tiny figure here, with the Vox Lil' Night Train (£227), the Blackstar HT-1RH (£179), the Palmer Eins (£200) and Fender's Pawn Shop Special Greta (£202) all offering ultra-low prices and a maximum weight of 4kg. Whether you pop them atop a suitable speaker cabinet or run direct to a mixing desk, they're a flexible choice for the budget-conscious muso on the move - and won't cause the curvature of the spine associated with a JCM800, for example (typical weight: 20.5kg).

Also worth noting is that all four of these heads contain serious weaponry, packing a selection of real valves under the bonnet. With real valves on tap, all three should offer a tone that detonates venues and spews molten soul all over your recording sessions. Relax your big-is-best preconceptions, and these micro machines could rock your world.





VOX LIL' NIGHT TRAIN £227

WE'VE played the Night Train in various sizes, but what's impressive is how much spec has filtered down from the big boys to the Lil'. Sure, we've lost the twin channels and some EQ, but the mirrored cheese grater chassis remains cool-as, and the contents cooler still, with twin 12AX7s in the preamp and one 12AU7 punting out power. There's also a Bright/Thick preamp mode selector, and a line out for 'phones or a mixing desk (as with all four).

Throw in the Night Train's separate gain and volume controls (meaning you can get rocking sounds at low decibels), and it's an



undeniably convenient package – but it does have limits. Plug in and you'll be reminded that, while two watts is punchy power, it's hardly stadium-sized, and you'll want to consider what application you're planning before you buy.

Still, if we're talking tone quality, the amp is predictably ace. Vox rules at clean, and on the Bright setting, the Lil' has plenty of headroom, letting you jangle at useful volumes before the valves rip the sound up. When

hitting chords hard on a neck single coil, the word is 'spanky': a tight-bottomed quack that sounds great, even before you link up your pedalboard. Meanwhile, moving to the Thick mode bypasses the EQ while boosting the gain, and this is a whole different ball game: it's thick, fat and ragged, but retains that Vox sparkle.

We're travelling first-class with the Lil' Night Train. But stick around: there's another head we like even more...

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Micro valve head
OUTPUT: 2 watts RMS into 16 ohms (1.5 watts into 8 ohms)
VALVES: 2x 12AX7, 1x 12AU7
CONTROLS: Gain, treble, bass, volume, Bright/Thick, power
SOCKETS: Input, line out, speaker out
WEIGHT: 2.2kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 117 x 222 x 117mm
CONTACT: Korg UK, 01908 304600
www.voxamps.com

FEATURES				
SOUND QUALITY				
VALUE FOR MONEY				
BUILD QUALITY				
USABILITY				
OVERALL RATING	★★★★★			

FENDER PAWN SHOP SPECIAL GRETA £202

LET'S take a look at the weird one, then. Despite coming on like the sort of wireless radio your grandparents would tune to *The Shipping Forecast*, the Greta is packing Fender know-how and a formidable spec. It's got a similar valve layout to the Vox (one 12AX7, one 12AT7), and all the line outs you'd hope for, but adds flexibility with an onboard four-inch speaker for blasting either guitar or mp3s. Not exactly a head or a combo, it's a serious oddity.

We think the Greta looks retro cool – especially the VU meter that pings from 'clean' to



'overload' – but it's not without a few practical sticking points. For starters, it's quite an awkward shape to lug about. For another, its volume/tone dials feel cheap and plasticky, turning stiffly and giving no visual indication as to where your sound is actually at. Third, there's no option of juggling volume and gain levels, which undermines this amp's flexibility in shared accommodation, unless you're satisfied to rock out with headphones some of the time.

The clean tone is decent, but it's the cranked output that really scores, proving this amp is as retro as it looks. If you crave old-school rock tones, the Greta is your dream ticket, and when that VU needle hits 'overload', there's a gloriously fuzzy low-end wallop that makes vintage 60s blues-rock riffs roar (just try *Crossroads*). That tone, combined with the quirk factor, makes the Greta worth a look – but overall, it's not quite up there on the podium.

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Micro valve head
VALVES: 1x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7
SPEAKER: 1x4"
CONTROLS: Volume, tone
SOCKETS: Guitar input, line out, speaker out, aux input
WEIGHT: 3.95kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 171 x 254 x 184mm
CONTACT: Fender, GBI 01342 331700
www.fender.com

FEATURES				
SOUND QUALITY				
VALUE FOR MONEY				
BUILD QUALITY				
USABILITY				
OVERALL RATING	★★★★★			

PALMER
EINS £200

YOU can always tell the world-class valve amps: they're the drab-looking ones with no bells and whistles. In light of that, the Palmer Eins is very promising. Hand-built in Germany by the 10-man team that aficionados bang on about, it has a real minimalist vibe, with everything housed in an unshowy metal brick, and only volume, tone and a boost switch to wrap your fingers around on the dash.

It's all terribly serious, but do a little digging and you'll realise there's more flexibility to the Eins than first appears. With the Hi-Z socket, for instance, you can



connect direct to an existing amp (using the Eins as a tone-fattening preamp), while Palmer actively encourages tweaking the valve configuration beyond the ECC83 and ECC82 it ships with.

That's great if you've got money to burn, but how does the Eins sound out of the box? Well, it's almost perfect. As ever, there's not exactly Wembley welly through a 1x10 cabinet, and with no separate volume and gain, there's limited headroom before the tone morphs

from a bright jangle into overdrive. Still, if it's all-out rawk that you're after, you'll be well satisfied, with Palmer's reputation justified by a Class A tone that stomps like a woolly mammoth.

There's a real character here – the Eins has an attitude-stuffed old-school thump that leans toward the low-end and rocks the house when you select a bridge pickup and hit the boost. It was almost enough to swing the test. Then the Blackstar landed...

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Micro valve head
OUTPUT: 1 watt
VALVES: 1x ECC83, 1x ECC82
CONTROLS: Volume, tone, boost, power
SOCKETS: Input, simulated output, Hi-Z output, 8/16-ohm speaker outs
WEIGHT: 2.2kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 108 x 206 x 128mm
CONTACT: Adam Hall Distribution
01702 613922 www.palmer-germany.com

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



BLACKSTAR
HT-1RH £179

FIVE years since the firm launched from a garden shed in Northampton, Blackstar feels like part of the furniture, and despite the lowliest price tag, the HT-1RH comes pre-loaded with high hopes. It's got a luxurious vintage-modern feel, with recessed dials and leather binding, plus the same ECC83 and ECC82 layout as the Eins, and although it's one of the heavier heads on test, the carry handle means it's actually easier to shunt. Good start.

In terms of inputs and sockets, it's business as usual, but when you start rocking, you realise just

how many great valve tones can be unlocked with just four dials. The HT-1RH offers two distinct channels (a footswitch would have been nice here), onboard reverb and Blackstar's now familiar ISF control that moves between US and UK-inspired EQ shapes – but the critical point is that all these trimmings deliver. Set the gain high on the clean channel, and you've got a jangle that's ready to blow (think Oasis). Flip channels, and you've got a warm, gravelly

distortion that breaks up under hard picking. The British end of the ISF is really warm and woody sounding, but at the risk of treason, it's the mid-heavy aggro of the US side that keeps you coming back. Best of all, even when you drop the decibels, it still roars and responds like a valve amp.

It's never gonna beat a stack in the icon stakes, but if you're after a head that's got ticks in every box, the HT-1RH delivers. It's a gold star for Blackstar...

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Micro valve head
OUTPUT: 1 watt
VALVES: 1x ECC83, 1x ECC82
CONTROLS: ISF, volume, gain, channel select, reverb, power
SOCKETS: Guitar input, mp3 input, phones/simulated output, speaker out
WEIGHT: 4kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 185 x 308 x 172mm
CONTACT: Blackstar, 01604 652844
www.blackstaramps.com

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