



Sheldon is not your ordinary amp manufacturer, and that's the way they like it. Martyn Casserly's exploration of current British gear makers takes him to Birmingham to meet some people who are determined to make business fun...

Bulldog Breed

Sheldon's world is not like that of most musical equipment manufacturers. Instead, it's a world filled with pyramid-shaped amplifiers and gun-shaped guitars – and it's presided over by a bulldog called Billy. Owners Mark Breecher and Shane Dolman believe in enjoying their work (in fact their website has a 'fun' section where you can play Space Invaders and Pacman), but don't think for a moment that they don't take it all very seriously.

Housed in Mark's music shop just outside Birmingham city centre, Sheldon is one of those increasingly rare manufacturers that handbuilds its amps on site. The amps themselves come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and on display during our visit were four – a head and 2x12" cab finished in plush brown leather, another amp that was built straight into a flightcase, a head made of clear perspex with blue lights inside, and, at the back of the in-store display, the now infamous 'Ra' pyramid amp has caused quite a stir at guitar shows everywhere this year.

'We just want to be as innovative as we can with our amps,' explains Mark. 'Playing it safe isn't something we like doing, so we decided to throw a load of our ideas into the pot and see what we could come up with. It wasn't so much a case of us thinking outside the box... we already *live* outside the box.'

The idea of building amps came after several conversations with customers,

who all voiced dissatisfaction with various amp manufacturers.

'I'd spent a couple of years getting really racked off with the way the suppliers did business,' remembers Mark. 'It seems that we don't know anything about customer focus in rock'n'roll, which is weird and very frustrating. So I teamed up with my business partner Shane, and we decided to do it ourselves.'

'The goal was simple, really – we wanted to build an ethical brand. Good on dealing with customers, answering questions real quick and always being there when somebody needed us.'

'The amp would be genre-specific blues/rock, and combine all our favourite features from amps we'd played down the years – plus it would be hand-wired, with absolutely no PCBs! Our plan was to build the amp we couldn't buy.'

For the next few months the duo laboured hard on a prototype. While Mark worked on the design and casings Shane got stuck into the circuitry, which was quite a challenge, especially after he broke a scaphoid bone in his hand.



Shane and Mark 'It's the amp we couldn't buy'



Brit power The showstopping Ra sits above a red 18/35W TT2 and a brown TT1 with a 2x12 cab

'Ever tried soldering with a cast on?' he asks, rhetorically. 'It's bloody difficult!'

'Because we designed the amps as gigging players,' explains Mark, 'we thought, wouldn't it be cool to build a head straight into a flightcase... you couldn't kill it! We did the same with the cab; you just take the front panel off.'

'We also put a compartment at the front for the leads and channel pedal,' says Shane. 'It's great; at the end of a gig you just chuck everything in the front of the amp, close up and you're out the door. The drummer hasn't even got his cymbals off yet!'

The circuit design included the unusual choice of four 6V6s in the power section. Shane gives his reasons: 'We decided that the amp should be between 35 and 50 watts, and for my money you can't get a better output valve than the 6V6,' he says. 'So many other boutique manufacturers, particularly in this country, were using EL84s at the time; not that there's anything wrong with them, but at 30W I much prefer the 6V6s. They've got a creamier tone than the EL84s, which can sound a bit harsh when they start to break up.'

'We also thought we'd give the option of a 'hot' preamp set-up or a 'cool' one. The hotter one included an extra 12AX7 valve in the preamp stage to give it a little more grunt. It's an uncommon design for a guitar amp, but it's used in hi-fi's all the time.'

'Although we wanted to be different in our approach, we didn't particularly aim to create a "Sheldon sound". We just wanted an amp that was fairly transparent and would let the tone of the guitar speak. If you plug in a Strat, you hear a Strat. If you plug in a 335, you hear a 335 – very definitely! That's why we called it TrueTone.'



Glass act A spectacular all-perspex TT1 head, able to cope with two or four 6V6 or 6L6 valves



Ready for the road The 'flight case' option looks the business, and doesn't cost a bean extra

'It wasn't so much a case of thinking outside the box... we already live outside the box' – Mark Breecher

The design was a success and Sheldon launched the TT1 amplifier head on 4 July 2002 at Birmingham's Music Live show. Glowing reviews from the music instrument press duly followed, and the orders started to flood in.

'I think my favourite thing that was said in a review,' chuckles Mark, 'was that the TT1 sounds like what you think an AC30 should sound like. I liked that.'

Increased demand meant that a larger workplace was soon needed, so drastic measures were taken. 'We used to have a recording studio and some practice rooms at the back of the music shop,' explains Mark, 'Nowadays, we chop wood in there!'

'And our upstairs office and the adjoining kitchen have been transformed to a valve-testing lab and electronics assembly

point,' he continues. 'But I'm not complaining. I'd much rather be building amps than making tea.'

As the customers grew, so the range expanded. An 18/35W 'Pub/Club' style amp (TT2) and a 1/3W studio/practice amp (TT3) filled out the True-Tone line up, with the TT4 (a harmonica/pedal steel/ acoustic guitar amp) joining them a year

or so later. Meanwhile, endorsement deals with some of the brightest young blues players in the UK were helping to raise the profile of the amps and display their capabilities in a live setting. Aynsley Lister, who has shared stages with blues greats such as Buddy Guy, Robert Cray and John Mayall, left a deal with Cornford amps to join up with Sheldon...



'We thought a pyramid-shaped amp would be cool, so we built it. And it is cool' – Mark Breecher

'I was playing at a guitar show for Cornford,' explains Lister, 'and Sheldon happened to be on the stand next door. They talked to me afterwards, and I agreed to try out one of their amps.'

'As soon as I plugged in I knew it was much more my sort of thing. The Cornfords are really good amps, but they're set up for a heavier sound than mine. The Sheldon amps just suited my style a whole lot better.'

'I'm a bit of a traditionalist with my gear – I like simple things that sound good. A lot of amps I've played tend to colour the sound, and no matter what guitar you use they all sound the same, but my Sheldon doesn't do that. I play a variety of guitars on stage, and when I put them through my TT2 it lets their individual characters come through without having to change the settings. That's what I want from an amp.'

But Mark and Shane are not the kind of guys to rest on their laurels, and this year sees the release of the next member of the Sheldon family, the Blackzone, an amp that aims to cater for a very different, harder-rocking audience. A quick look at the control panel will give you a clue: the Blackzone has dispensed with such things as High, Mid and Bass, only to replace them with mysterious dials like Wail, Thunder, and Lightning.

'We just decided to invent a new language for the Blackzone,' states Mark with a grin, 'Who wants High when you could have Scream? Why not have dials that describe what they actually do? The only thing you really need to know about these amps is that we ship them out with every dial set on 10!'

As well as the standard Blackzone head and cab, combo or 5W studio head options, the Blackzone also comes in 'Ra', an extremely striking pyramid-shaped head and cab arrangement.

'I suppose the first question people have is "why?"' ponders Mark, 'and of course my answer would be "why not?" Things can get a little boring and safe in this industry, with few of the major manufacturers wanting to take any chances with their brands. We just thought it would be cool, so we built it, and it is cool.'

GUITARS



Adorning the wall of Sheldon's office are several notable guitars – one of them a black Gibson 335 signed by BB King. 'He was playing at the NIA several years ago,' explains Mark. 'I took it with me and managed to get close enough to him afterwards for him to sign it. He even played it a little... I haven't changed the strings since.'

The strangest looking ones are two gun-shaped guitars that Mark designed and built himself. 'I used to be in a band called The Redbeards and we played a load of old ZZ Top numbers,' he grins. 'I just wanted something that would catch the eye, and gun-shaped guitars are good for that!'

Next to these hangs a lovely-looking Les Paul with a strange story attached to it. 'You see these pickups,' indicates Mark, 'they're real PAFs from a '59 335.'



Some guy contacted me a while back saying that his dad had just died and he wanted me to fix up his guitar for him. When I got there I saw it was a '59 335 in pretty much mint condition. It looked like his dad had bought it new, then put it in its case under his bed and left it there until he died. The guy wanted it restored to new condition, like when his dad bought it, and the only thing wrong was that the

nickel on the pickup covers had oxidized a bit over the years. I told him that they couldn't be made to look new and pointed out the value of them and the guitar, but he wasn't interested in money – he just wanted it for sentimental reasons.

'So I fitted it with official Gibson '59 reissue pickups and paid him a fair price for the PAFs. For all I know he just put it in its case and then back under the bed.'

With plans for a relocation to bigger premises later this year, and a 'Sun-of-Ra' combo in the pipeline (as well as the forthcoming Boneshaker bass guitar amps and Peerless boutique amp range), it can only be a matter of time before you



see pyramid-shaped amps adorning stages up and down the country (and much scratching of roadies' heads as they try to work out how to pick them up).

But if the idea of an Egyptian inspired design or learning the new 'Blackzone' language causes you concern, then let the Zen wisdom of Shane Dolman be your guide: 'In the end,' he advises, 'you just turn the knobs until it sounds good. It don't take long.'



For more information about Sheldon, see www.sheldonamps.com