

WIN A SHELTON TRUE TONE 3 WORTH £499

■ Do you crave saturated valve tones at sensible volumes? If so then the True Tone 3 from British amp specialists Sheldon could well be the amp for you. Decked out in striking red vinyl, the True Tone 3 is a hand-built, hand-wired, one-watt Class A to three-watt Class AB tone machine that is perfect for recording and intimate performances. Featuring Sheldon's unique patent-pending 'Compass' rotary tone control and 'Freeze' hi-cut, this innovative combo is remarkably flexible and offers a range of classy sonic options whilst preserving the essential character of your instrument. So, if the Sheldon is right up your street then have a bash at this brain-teaser:

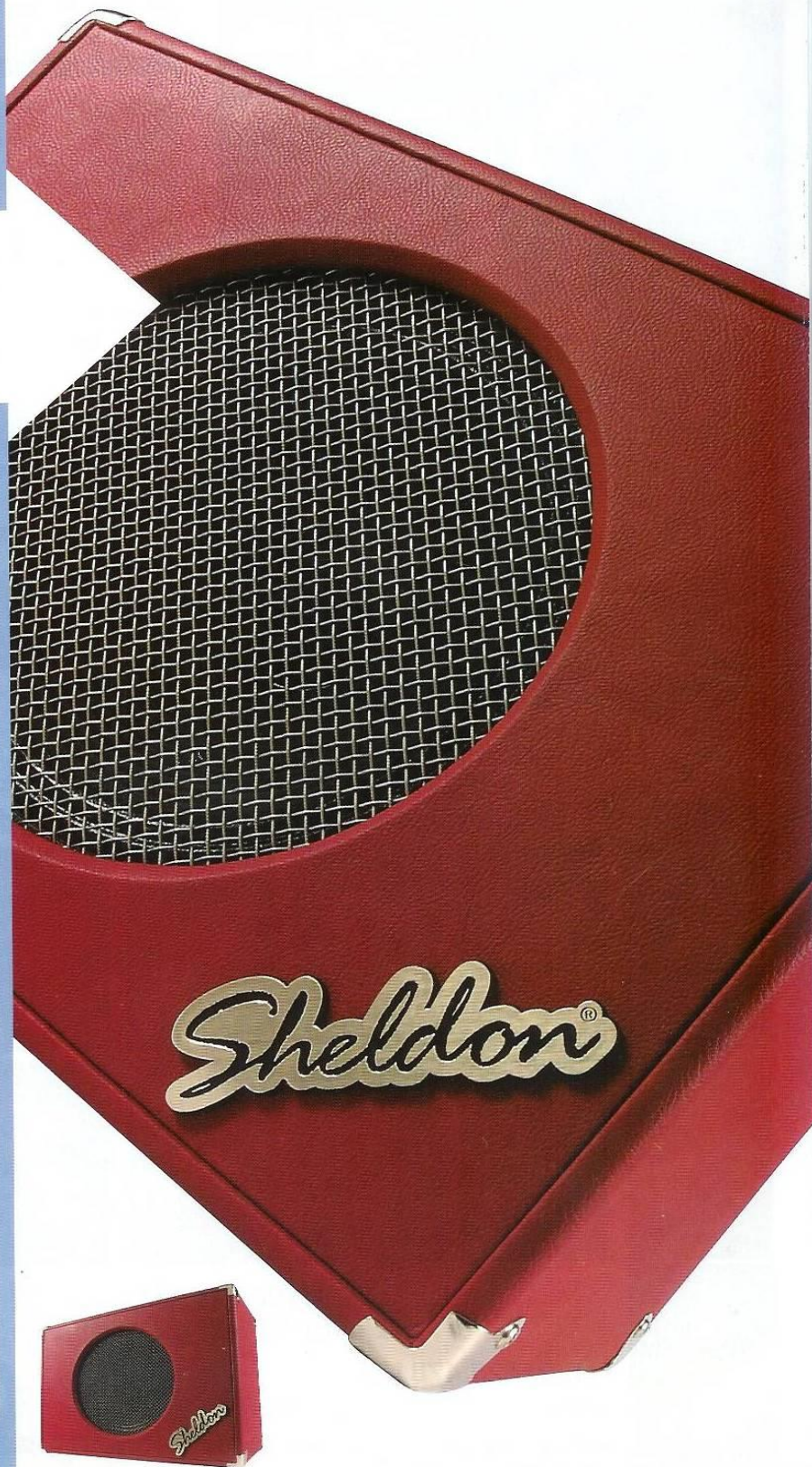
In which British city is Sheldon Amplification based?

- A) Edinburgh
- B) York
- C) Birmingham

To enter text your answer to 84600. Type GUIT SHELTON (including the space) plus a, b, or c and please read the terms and conditions below for further details. Closing date for this competition is 21 July 2004.

TERMS & CONDITIONS

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WIN!

**WORTH
£499!**

SHELDON TRUETONE 3

Thanks to the kind people at Sheldon Amplification, we have an impressive TrueTone 3 combo to give away to one lucky reader!

Reviewed this month on page 124, this is the ideal amp for low-volume practice and high-quality recording due to its all-tube design and variable gain characteristics.

For the full spec, turn to pages 124-128, then get your head around this woefully difficult brain-teaser to go into the hat...

The TrueTone 3 offers variable control over what?

- a) Class A and class A/B operation
- b) Class A and class C narcotics
- c) I think the class system is unfair and outdated

TO ENTER:

Write the correct answer on the back of a postcard or sealed-down envelope. Include your name, address and a daytime telephone number and send it to...

ONE-WATT'S THE STORY,
MORNING GLORY. *Guitar Buyer,*
MB Media, PVD Innovation Centre,
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www.sheldonamps.com

THE RULES

The closing date for entries is 28 May 2004. The winner will be picked at random from the correct answers and notified by telephone. Employees of MB Media or Sheldon Amplification may not enter. The editor's decision is final, there is no cash alternative, no correspondence will be entered into. Multiple entries will be ritually humiliated on reality TV with all the other rubbish.





Sheldon True Tone TT1 head £1,449

A new British amp name that's likely to become better known in the near future: Sheldon's True Tone makes its Guitarist debut by Nick Guppy

Sheldon Amplification is based in Birmingham and has been picking up a lot of converts recently with the new True Tone range. Hand-built using top components, and with some unique design features, the True Tone is beginning to make its presence felt among players looking for a solid workhorse amp that sings the blues with finesse, but can rock when you need it to. On test this month is the top of the range TT1 'Hot' model.

The True Tone's styling is a mix of vintage and modern details. The cabinet is made from high-grade plywood and, as you can see, our review model is covered in a padded tan leather jacket – a custom order option available at extra cost. The hide's padding and topstitched edges mean that it's pulled into folds at the corners where covering fabric is normally overlapped and cut. We think that dispensing with the padding and topstitching would give a neater finish. The front and rear grilles look a little on the thin side as well and would doubtless benefit from beefing up with a thicker wire gauge.

The TT1's electronics are enclosed by a neatly folded, open-ended steel tray chassis. Sheldon uses the eyelet board style of point-to-point wiring, with two thick fibreglass epoxy boards

– one for audio, one for the power supply. These are drilled at strategic points, then metal eyelets are riveted into the holes for the components to be soldered into. Similar to Fender's high dollar Custom Shop amps, it's a very neat and well-finished layout, with screen printing and labelling for all the board components – the soldering and wiring is impeccable too. Overall, it's well put together and looks ready to take on the clumsiest of roadies.

With some unusual controls on the front panel a read through of the well-written manual is worthwhile.

For blues, jazz and classic rock, this Sheldon is right in the sonic ballpark and the price is reasonable too

SHELDON TRUE TONE TT1 TEST RESULTS

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

WE LIKED A good tonal range, useful features, and volume to spare for live use
WE DISLIKED We think the leather covering and grilles need tweaking to improve the amp's appearance a bit

Essentially we have a single channel head with gain, master and three-band EQ, but the TT1 gets a lot of extra range from a clever quasi-parametric control called the Compass. "Most of our ideas happen as a result of a lot of brainstorming... usually when we're sat around a pub table," says Sheldon boss Mark Breecher. "The Compass control was the result of someone asking, Where do you want your tone to go? That gave me the concept and the electronics were designed around it. We tend to build all our amps from the front panel back."

In addition to the Compass control, the TT1 also benefits from something called Special Sauce. "You can get a lot of extra gain from lifting the tone network out of the circuit," comments Mark. "Rather than use a switch, we thought it would be great to put it on a knob as well so you can vary the gain increase and footswitch it in and out as required." Another control called Freeze is a Vox-style cut control and works on the power stage to vary the tone from icy sharp through to something more mellow and rounded.

On the back panel you'll find the normal complement of loudspeaker jacks, as well as a rather handy pentode/triode switch that halves the output in triode mode and offers

SHELDON TRUE TONE TT1 HEAD

PRICE: £1,449

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: All valve single-channel head with solid-state rectification

OUTPUT: Nominal 40 watts RMS

VALVES: Three ECC83 preamp, four 6V6 power amp

DIMENSIONS: 260 (h)

x 650 (w) x 250mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 18/39

CABINET: 18mm ply

CHANNELS: One

CONTROLS: Volume, low, mid, high, Compass, Special Sauce, Freeze, master volume

FOOTSWITCH: Single latching footswitch toggles Special Sauce function (not included)

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Pentode/triode switch, external bias controls with test points

OPTIONS: Standard TT1 costs £1,199. Leather covering adds £250, as with our review sample

RANGE OPTIONS: The TT1 Cool head version costs £1,099, and there's the TT112 (£399.99) and TT212 (£599.99) cabinets. The TT1 Hot and Cool combos cost £1,399 and £1,299 respectively

Sheldon Amplification
 07801 552888

www.sheldonamps.com

The rivals

Matamp 1224 MkII £649
Cornford MK50H head
£1,299
Ashdown Peacemaker 50
£1,349

Cornford's MK50H is one of the Sheldon's few real competitors, with an equally great sound, but less tonal flexibility. Matamp's 1224 MkII is unbelievable value for money, with tone, build and features that are hard to beat; most of all it's the price that gives them the edge in the boutique arena. Ashdown's Peacemaker has looks, tone, features and sound to die for – it's a serious boutique amp that is on a par with the world's best

→ a sweeter tone. There's also a jack for a footswitch to remotely control the Special Sauce, and a pair of test points for matching both halves of the push-pull power stage.

SOUNDS: Plugged in and switched on with blue LEDs glowing inside the cabinet the TT1 looks cool, and there's very little hum or hiss. We used a 2 x 12 cabinet loaded with Celestion Vintage 30 and Greenback speakers, which are, coincidentally, Sheldon's preferred choice for this amp. Once our heads had got around the theory of the Compass control, it was time to see how well it worked in practice – and the answer was that it worked very nicely indeed. Set at north it doesn't affect the tone, but heading south-west (turning the knob anti-clockwise) reduces mid-range and adds top-end sparkle, while heading south east accentuates the mids and adds a gnarly grind at high settings.

The TT1 is available in 'Hot' and 'Cool' versions that are preset at the factory to give the best performance range for either type. Ours is the Hot version, and winding up the gain delivers a very rich 'brown' distortion with humbuckers, while turning things down changes the voicing to a remarkably sweet and crisp clean sound, with a good dynamic response that sits very nicely in a live mix.

The Special Sauce feature is a useful extra boost. Wound up all the way, you're actually bypassing the three tone controls for a straight-through

Winding up the gain gives a very rich 'brown' distortion, turning things down gives a sweet and crisp clean sound

sound, which you are then able to fine-tune using the additional Compass and Freeze controls.

Like another famous British amp that has recently exploded back on to the scene, the True Tone is powered by a quartet of 6V6 valves, although there's more than enough bias range to replace these with 6L6s or EL34s. We tried both types, as well as mixing them, to see how well the TT1 behaved. The manual is very useful here, with comprehensive instruction on biasing and tips for tweaking the amp to get the sound you want from it.

Fun though this was, we found ourselves coming back to the 6V6s that the amp was supplied with, deciding that this was the best-sounding option. The 6V6 is a rather special valve for guitars in our opinion, and using a quartet for around 35–40 watts means you're getting an ideal balance of power, with just the right amount of clean headroom to compete with a drum kit and give you the chance to drive the power stage properly when it's solo time. The TT1's matched quartet of Groove Tubes do the business very nicely, staying sweet and pure up to around halfway on the master volume before adding a raunchy snarl that sounds great for blues or classic rock.

Kicking in the TT1's Special Sauce feature adds a nice lift for solos and,

despite the limitations of single channel amps, we found it quite easy to dial in a good rhythm and lead sound. Bedroom heroes won't be disappointed either: at low volumes the TT1 still sounds like a nicely cranked amp with no noticeable change in tone, thanks to some clever design work on the master volume control.

Verdict

Sheldon has done a good job of expanding the single channel format without sacrificing usability, and having gigged the TT1 it is easy to see why a lot of players are showing interest: it's a very vocal and organic sound that flatters any guitar you plug into it without bias.

For blues, jazz and classic rock it's right in the sonic ballpark and the price is reasonable too, given that these amps are made entirely by hand. Discerning players now have another name to add to their 'must try' list of guitar amps.

It's also good to see another great British amp out there in the market, and if Sheldon keeps producing models that sound as good as this one they're going to give the competition a hard time. Book an audition – you won't be disappointed. **G**

Sheldon True Tone TT1 head

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★



Review



BOTTLED UP

Groove Tubes on the inside for tone out from

Sheldon TrueTone 1 Hand-Built Valve Head

WHILE COUNTLESS NEWCOMERS rebuild past classics, this fresh British maker has honed a design that bursts with originality – and packs a punch. Review by Dave Hunter

The 'boutique' ethos is well established in this country by now, and most players are aware of the sheer fun to be had from hand-wired, point-to-point valve amps – though often low on features, they're generally equally high on tonal integrity. The trouble is, when such amps are imported from the US, this kind of quality can come hand in hand with stratospheric price tags. Luckily, respected British makers like Cornford, Cornell and a handful of others have been making great domestic options more affordably. Now Birmingham-based newcomer Sheldon aims to rival the best of them, whether from Kent or California, with its range of TrueTone amplifiers.

Sheldon was formed in 2002 by valve enthusiast and designer Shane Dolman and Mark Breecher, and carefully began building up to actual production over the past year or so. Testing and prototyping takes time and, wanting to get things right rather than rush to the market, they carefully honed a range of designs

until the TrueTone that you see before you was as close to perfection as they felt it could be.

Most hand-built amps, let's face it, tread heavily in the footprints of tweed Fenders, the Vox AC30 or the Marshall plexi, with a few added tweaks. Sheldon are being more creative, and they've incorporated a number of elements of creative contemporary tubular thinking into a design that stands totally apart.

The one-channel preamp has a broad range of tone-shaping features, while the class AB output section is extremely versatile. The TrueTone ships with four Groove Tubes 6V6 output valves for 30W-35W of power, but the user can swap these for a pair or quartet of 6L6s or EL34s (40W or 50W), a combination of 2x6V6s and 2x6L6s (35W-40W), or a few other options. More than the changes in output power, each different combination of course offers tonal variations. The amp can be easily rebiased to cope with the changes, too, with bias point hot and earth connections located on

TRUETONE 1

£1099

the back panel, and clear, concise instructions included in the manual. You'll need a quality multimeter, of course, and a little biasing experience wouldn't hurt.

The TrueTone has no actual channel switching, and just one 12AX7 in the preamp section (another takes phase inverter duties), and yet the amp's front panel carries eight white chickenhead control knobs. Now, I don't normally trust any amp with more than five controls per channel, and usually two will do me just fine. Look at the classics: tweed Bassmans and JTM45s or Plexis have Vol, Treble, Bass, Middle, Presence; a Vox AC30 Top Boost has Vol, Treble, Bass and Cut; an AC15 or tweed Deluxe has just Vol and Tone. Add a master volume to the bigger of these for flexibility, and you've got six knobs. The TrueTone adds a further two, enigmatically labelled Compass and Special Sauce. Compass is a 'variable tone rotary' linked close to the input stage, which takes you from high-emphasising sparkle to mid-heavy grind. Special Sauce has its own on/off switch and a rear-panel jack for a footswitch, and it governs a variable network for lifting the tone controls from earth to create a gain boost. The fewer tone controls in the way, the hotter the preamp – which is part of the reason those two-knob Deluxes and AC15s and no-tone tweed Champs are so fiery.

Otherwise, we're looking at the five-knob-plus-master arrangement of your larger classics, although the TrueTone carries an AC30-like Cut control (calling it Freeze) rather

than the Presence of the old Fenders and Marshalls. In the 1960s, when poor connector cables and tone-sucking effects like early wah-wahs and load-inducing fuzzes sapped the treble from your rig, the Presence was a useful way of wringing as much sparkle as possible out of what was left. Set-ups are usually more efficient these days, and unchecked modern amps can have far more piercing highs than anyone wants to hear, so the Cut control – which reduces highs at the output stage – has become a popular addition. The TrueTone's works in reverse, seeming to add treble as you turn it up, but fully clockwise giving you the amp in its natural state; wind it down, and you're tapping off the treble. In short, each of the controls does something useful, so it's hard to fault them, and Sheldon have clearly put some deep thought into this design. But I can't help thinking there are plenty of amps out there that lead you to the best sounds on earth with rather fewer knobs to twiddle.

The front panel also carries both power and standby switches, although these are labelled Ready and Go. In addition to the bias points and a footswitch jack for the Special Sauce in/out, the back panel carries two speaker jacks with a 4Ω/8Ω/16Ω switch and a Triode/Pentode switch. Flipping to the former reconfigures the output valves to drop the power by about half.

The TrueTone is a great looker. It's covered in a hard-wearing ivory vinyl, with a cobalt-blue control panel and a matching pilot light, and when you switch on another three small lamps come on inside to cast a blue glow across the valves and trannies, all visible through the wire mesh front grille. Rugged construction, great looks – and something that's harder and harder to achieve these days, an *original* design.

Popping the chassis out reveals equally tidy workmanship within. The TrueTone's main circuitry is hand-soldered on an extra-thick eyelet board, and a look inside the head reveals impressively neat and robust wiring work. Nothing jiggles or moans when you knock it – this amp has been built to last. The inside view also confirms the lack of valve rectification, revealing four silicon diodes on the power supply board for a firm, responsive feel, which is countered somewhat by the absence of a choke. Instead, a large resistor helps to filter current ripple, and theoretically it'll do it in a looser, more forgiving fashion than a choke.

So far, other than the 'creative' names on some of the many controls (for my money, call a spade a spade and a cut control a cut control), the only oddity is that the TrueTone has three hefty rubber feet rather than the usual four, the bolts of which also secure the chassis to the bottom of the cab. It makes for easier maintenance access, and I know three points on a plane is more stable than four, but it still seems it might sit oddly on some surfaces.

SOUNDS

We tested the TrueTone with a Strat and an SG, plugged into a 2x12" Vox extension cab with reissue Celestion Alnico Blues. Setting the amp for maximum headroom to begin, you might immediately notice a certain firmness, even a hardness, at the front of the notes.

FACTFILE



SHELDON TRUETONE 1

Description: single-channel, 30W-35W all-valve head with 2x12AX7s and 4x6V6; solid state rectification. Made in Britain

RRP: £1099

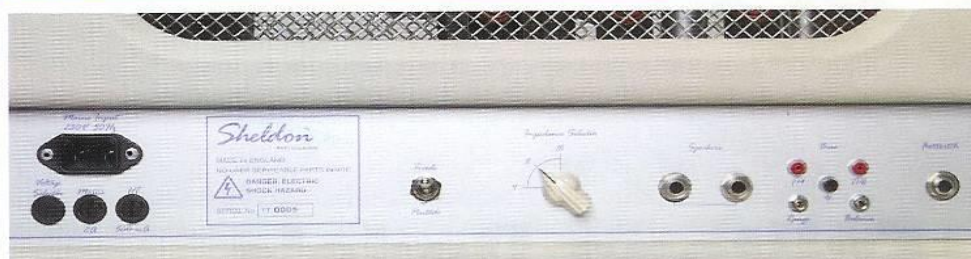
Controls: Volume, Compass, High, Middle, Low, Special Sauce, Freeze, Freeze in/out switch, Master; Ready and Go switches (power and standby)

Features: Multiple output valve

configurations; 4Ω/8Ω/16Ω speaker outs, Triode/Pentode switch

Contact: Sheldon ☎ 0121 246 8887

Web: www.sheldonamps.com



It makes for precise articulation and an in-your-face attack, but it's also not plummy and forgiving like many vintage valve amps, or indeed vintage-inspired modern boutiques. Clean to edge-of-breakup bluesers might not take to it, but it bodes well for a taut, controlled response when we crank right up and things get hairier.

While we're still thinking clean, it's worth noting that the overall tonality is predominantly mizzly, even with Middle rolled down. There's not a lot of high-frequency shimmer and chime, but no high harshness either, and good body in the low end. It's a pleasing all-round voice, and while there's not a great deal of sparkle, there's no shortage of treble with Compass pointing to south-west and the Freeze up high.

Set the Master to three-quarters or maximum and get the Volume up to about halfway, and the TrueTone begins to bite and roar. It's got a muscular and full-bodied breakup, which retains a good response

throughout the frequency range thanks to that firmness noted earlier, plus real punch in the middle. Roll the Compass clockwise and the whole thing thickens up considerably; switch in Special Sauce – dialled from two o'clock to four o'clock – and you've got serious grind. There's still not a lot of compression in the pick attack – surprising for a 6V6-based amp – and a certain hardness in the front of the notes remains, but it's a thumping, aggressive wallop that a lot of players will really love.

Throughout the driven tones I feel I'm hearing some asymmetrical clipping, too, which fattens things up by adding what sounds like an edge of odd harmonic overtones, though I might be mistaken. This amp might not be the ticket for devotees of smooth, creamy, sweet distortion, then, but there's aggression and attack here that will be just dandy for hard-hitting blues-rockers, and many others besides. At full whack, the TrueTone roars with serious punch. This is a newcomer to contend with.



VERDICT

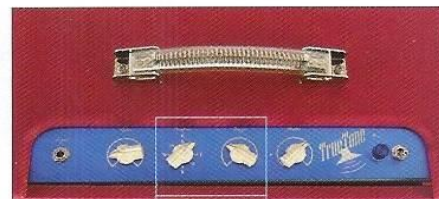
The Sheldon TrueTone 1 is a seriously well-constructed amplifier. It looks great both inside and out, and I'm pleased to see a creative, original design rather than just a rehash of a slightly modded Fender, Vox or Marshall classic. Hats off, then, for looks, design, build quality... and the price really isn't bad, considering. There's a lot of tonal

integrity here, and hard-hitting players will find this a perfect vehicle for putting their punch in your face. It's maybe just a touch aggressive and hard-edged for my personal tastes and lacks a fraction of the touch-inducing compression that many enjoy in a quality valve amp, but by all fair and reasonable standards it's a great amp.



SHELDON TRUE TONE 3 GEAR

The TT3 is a very attractive hand-made valve amp. The opportunity to swap in other valves means its tone spectrum is blown wide open



Sheldon's Compass dial might just be the most innovative EQ control around; a single dial that finds your perfect tone in seconds

Sheldon's Freeze dial is a simple means of specifying output and tone, taking you from the 1Watt minimum to just over 3Watts

£499

SHELDON TRUE TONE 3

A 1WATT AMP THAT ROCKS? SHELDON'S RED DEVIL DEFIES EXPECTATIONS WORDS: HENRY YATES

> Does Satan know you've borrowed his suitcase?

Ah yes – that colour. OK, so the TT3's tinge might be on the fire-and-brimstone side, but unless you're sharing the studio with an angry bull, it shouldn't be an issue. Let's try concentrating on what's inside, eh?

First, the TT3 isn't Lucifer's representative on earth – it's a hand-made, all-valve combo amp that promises exceptional tone and versatility. Secondly, it wasn't knocked up in the seventh league of Hell, but in the heart of Birmingham. And, yes, there is a difference...

Valves? Is that a good thing?

Too right it is, pal. Of course, there's no doubting the quality of modern solid-state amps, but to the average blank-chequed gear aficionado, a genuine tube model has always been the ultimate. Granted, valve amps can often be crippling expensive (and heavy), but the payoff is a rich, organic roar that takes on a natural raggedness at high volume. Oh, and Jack White insists on them – if you want to be shallow about it.

The TT3 has a total of five Groove Tube valves; three cathode-biased 6X12AU7s in the output section, with two 6X12AX7s taking care of the pre-amp stage (where your guitar signal is 'tidied up' ready for amplification). That's your standard spec, but the option of swapping in other valves means this amp's tone spectrum is blown wide open.

And how is the tone?

Given this amp's boutique vibe, TG went in expecting tonal fireworks – and we certainly got them. Kicking off with some clean Telecaster riffing, we were struck by both the TT3's clarity and its ability to fatten up the sound without obscuring the guitar's characteristic snap and pop. Very impressive, and exactly what you'd expect from an amp range used by harmonica players. Indeed,

WHO'S IT FOR?

Minted axemen after gorgeous valve tone for recording and quiet practice; anyone with money and taste

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All-valve hand-made combo amp
OUTPUT: 1Watt (SE) – 3Watt (PP)
VALVES: 3x 6X12AU7 (output), 2x 6X12AX7 (pre-amp)
DIMENSIONS: 400 x 560 x 250mm (HxWxD)
WEIGHT: 16kg
LOUDSPEAKER: Celestion
CONTROLS: Master volume, master gain, compass EQ, freeze
RANGE OPTIONS: Custom options available on request
CONTACT: Sheldon 0121 246 8887
WEB: www.sheldonsamps.com

ALTERNATIVELY

Marshall MG30DFX – £139
Laney MXD65 – £229
Ashdown Cotton Club Blues 1x12 – £1,199

ON THE CD

TRACK 56
Crunch Punch
By Jason Sidwell and Mike Hannon

We were struck by both the TT3's clarity and its ability to fatten up a sound without obscuring the guitar's tone

from spidery single-note runs to swollen, mid-heavy chording, we always found the amp's delivery totally convincing – its own voice combining subtly with that of our instrument with satisfying results. Cytics might claim a valve amp's edge is merely psychological – they'd be shovelling down the humble pie on this occasion.

Aren't you going to crank it up?

Patience, my safety-pinned friend – we haven't forgotten. Pile on some gain and the TT3 suddenly develops a real attitude problem, belching forth an overdrive that swings from smooth roar to buzzsaw bite – again, without ever swamping the voice of the guitar. And it's here that we felt those Groove Tube valves really made their presence felt, lending an underlying warmth to TG's anti-social racket. Two thumbs up, plus countless unhappy neighbours. A result.

Tell me about those dials...

OK, you've a basic gain control (for unleashing varying degrees of hell) and a master volume dial (no prizes), along with two of the more exotic knobs we've seen.

Sheldon's Compass dial might just be the most innovative EQ control around; a single dial that finds your perfect tone in seconds. Point the needle South, for instance, and you'll get the warmest sound imaginable, while going West gradually brings in more definition. Head North and you'll find your tone becoming keener and more trebly, while the East end is as shrill as a Walthamstow fishwife. This isn't just gimmickry – it makes nailing the ultimate tone far easier than the

usual balancing of treble, mid and bass dials. And let's face it, it's the only time you'd want to visit the North East.

How about the other one?

Well, Sheldon's Freeze dial continues the amp's faint camping theme. It's a simple, hands-on means of specifying output and tone – taking you from the 1Watt minimum to just over 3Watts, while also adding an extra dimension of sonic tweakability. Clever stuff.

Hang about, that's not much power.

Not on paper, but you'd be surprised at the grunt the TT3's cabinet lends to its overall sound. Besides, this amp simply isn't meant for blowing the National Grid – it's designed as a pro-quality recording amp – although small-scale jams and bedroom shreds are certainly feasible with the volume produced.

Bottom line – do I want one?

Of course you do. The TT3 is an amp of serious pedigree, with a level of tone and versatility that'll expose your cheapo amp as the shoebox it really is. But what did you expect? A hand-made valve amp is always going to shine against mass-produced competition.

The issue is price. We're not saying the TT3 is expensive (when you consider the quality, it's very reasonable), but it probably wouldn't suit a younger player, who's happy to compromise tone, and needs giggable sounds on a tight budget. The players who'll be blown away are the tone-heads who want to make the most of their (expensive) instruments, or players wanting amazing sound for recording. If that's you, the TT3 demands your attention. Devilishly good.

FOR: Excellent tone; great versatility
AGAINST: Boutique quality; boutique price...

TG RATING:



Jean Machine

It seems that Sheldon Amps have a sense of humour. Not only have we come across their amps in standard Tolex and flightcased forms, but also shaped like pyramids, and — like this TrueTone Junior model — all kitted out to look like a pair of jeans... But what's there to charm us when we've stopped sniggering?

Review by Ed Bryning

In front of us is a guitar amp covered in denim, with copper corners, and a copper coloured handle — it is meant to, and does, look like a pair of jeans... It's brilliantly naff in conception, and funnier than a jelly bed to look at. We love it, naturally.

Of course, there's plenty to love, because — like a beautiful woman clad in denim (or a man, if that's your thing) — what's underneath the material is a lot more interesting than the clothes themselves... And anyway, with the number of standard and custom options this Birmingham-based amp maker offers, if you don't like it, just ask the guys to build you one you do. In the case of the Sheldon TrueTone Junior, you're looking at the guitar amp holy grail — a hand-built wee valve beastie packed with a Sheldon/Groove



⚡ Forget about the comedy covering of the TrueTone Junior, underneath it lies a very nice, simple valve amp capable of producing some very pleasing tones.

Tubes GT12AX7 in the preamp and another 12BH7 in the output stage.

In terms of control and features, it's simple stuff — a master volume for the output level, and a knob marked 'Compass' — essentially a one-stop tone control which acts like a swept parametric EQ sending it all on to either the 1/4" line output, or to the Celestion Vintage 10" speaker.

Performance

When you get the TT Junior fired up you're instantly charmed by the tone, but even before you hit a note, you're impressed by just how quiet the amp is — down to the design of the preamp, Sheldon say. There is nothing, not a hum, a hiss or a buzz until you want there to be. It's a very impressive start... But of course, you're not intending to part with £500 notes to hear silence, are you?

So it's pleasing to know that the TT Junior is even more impressive when it's making

a noise. The controls are simple, and make tone shaping an absolute doddle. The clean tones come at lower volumes — and allow a great chiming, full bodied ring from a Tele, or nice jazzy tones from a humbuckered Les Paul — ably assisted by the Compass control, which operates like a swept parametric EQ, boosting different areas of the signal as you sweep it around.

It's one of the most simple and effective tone shaping controls we've come across... Quick and intuitive — as these things should be. But it's the grit that really gets the pulse racing, as gain is added — by setting the Compass knob around to the final quarter of its travel — the signal fractures beautifully into a warm buzz; layer in more and you get that rich blues overdrive tone savoured by so many. It's really beautifully voiced, in a way that's hard to convey in a review... But it's as simple as putting this against another valve model — or virtually any other amp — and hearing the difference.

Cohesive, fattening harmonics ring through the sustain, the drive is wonderfully expressive and works beautifully with the guitar, rather than taking it over. It's basically a lead player's dream — in terms of tone, if not power. There's just enough volume here for rehearsal, or a low-ish volume gig — especially if you are miking into a PA. But, the quality of the sound, the fact that it offers a line out (allowing it to act as a preamp for a bigger rig, or for a line in) make it the absolutely ideal choice for recording.

Verdict

This particular TrueTone Junior model is a funny-looking amp that really is no joke. For luscious blues and rock tones, when volume is not vital but great sound is, it is a great choice. Yes, it's a good chunk of money for a low output, but boy does this baby sing. And, as a preamp, it's priceless. Forget the denim finish, it's optional... Whatever it's covered with, you'll feel the quality. **mm**



The Compass control is a very clever way of shaping the amp's tone — to great effect.

musicmart

Sheldon TrueTone Jr £499

Key Notes

- 1 Watt Class A Valve Amp w/ 12BH7 Output stage and Sheldon GT12AX7 preamp.
- Volume, Compass (tone) controls.
- Eyelet board construction, with thick glass epoxy circuit board.
- Custom wound transformers.
- Celestion Vintage 10" speaker or attenuated line out.

High Notes

- Great looks...
- If you don't like it, just tell 'em what you want.
- Does all the wonderful things a good valve amp should do.
- Preamp output ideal for some recording apps.

Low Notes

- Relatively low volume.
- Clean tones only come at very low volumes.

Sheldon: (0121) 743 1504
www.sheldonamps.com

Best Of

Technology strides ever forward, producing more complex products every year – but some things persist because they're yet to be bettered, and every now and then it's refreshing to receive a product that respects this.

Sean Bown takes a look at the new all-valve Sheldon TrueTone 1 head and 2x12 cab – a high-end combination from a company that aims to produce the finest in valve equipment, where tone is all that matters in life.

The first thing that springs to mind about the review model Sheldon *TrueTone* is that it's white – well Ivory, to give it its proper name. Stupid I know, especially as I have no problem with it. But it did – at first – say to me, that this rig has been built to stay well away from the dingy pub scene that so many of us end up in at the weekend. Y'know, the kind of place where just getting your kit to the stage is like a Marine assault course, and the various fluids that man and booze create in tandem make you fear the introduction of any kind of electricity.

They're certainly not the place for anything wh... sorry, Ivory, let alone your amplification pride and joy. You should not judge Sheldon on this colour though, as there are five standard enclosure options – including a flightcased model – to choose from, and the company are more than happy to deal with most stylistic requests through their custom shop (quotes on request). Besides, the inside of this amp belies its rather fancy styling. Like the carrying straps, which are natty designed springs in transparent plastic tubes – which don't sound promising, but look cool and are actually very sturdy.

BLUE TONE

The front panel – styled in a very fifties manner with pointer adorned rotary pots – consists of the following controls and options; Input (standard 1/4" jack type), Volume – which controls the input gain level, Compass – a variable tone rotary, High/Middle/Low – which deal with basic tone-shaping and Special Sauce – which gives a boost by lifting the stack from ground with the use of a potentiometer. This last control allows a pre-set level boost for soloing or if the controls are fully clockwise the amps natural tone is dominant. The Freeze control can transform the tone from icy sharp (giving a searing solo tone that's guaranteed to cut through any mix) to smooth and

mellow for chords, and is followed by Master Volume, Ready (power switch), and finally Go, which is the stand-by switch. Now to the back panel options.

At the back, the Triode/Pentode switch configures the output valves to full power (Pentode) mode or half-power (Triode) mode – the latter, whilst diminishing power, provides a higher amount of even harmonics in the signal – conducive to smoother tones and ideal for recording. Then there's an impedance selector, speaker outlets, bias control – which is offered for easy access external bias controls to optimise the *TrueTone*'s output section to your choice of choice of output valve (many options are offered here, whereas the inputs section requires 2 x 12AX7s. After this you have the aforementioned output power valves, and finally footswitch input for selecting the boost channel (every *TrueTone* comes with a footswitch included, which is more than you can say for some!). So far all this promises for one hell of an amp and to make sure you get the optimum sound and tone Sheldon have all this going through 2x 12" Celestion 30's, which is a great choice to deliver what hopefully will be some cracking tones.

TRUE TONE, YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT!

With my guitar in hand and now raring to go, and firing the *True Tone* up for the first time – this is an experience in itself, and left the rehearsal room silent as everyone fixed their stares on the bright blue glow coming from the head grille. Then comes the mad rush to get a closer view – as through this wire mesh you can see the circuitry, and – more importantly – the valves. It all looks a million dollars, and offers a great touch of theatricality to the whole package. Once the valves have warmed up nicely, I quickly set all the controls to half, and got down to strumming through a number of chord progressions and riffs.

At this point I need to tell you just how smooth this amp is at its cleaner settings – in fact I go as far to say this is probably

Quick Flicks – Performance



...PA Part 3 - pg 82



Gemini - pg 92



Peavey - pg 114



John Birch - pg 132

British



best amp I've heard. Regardless of what settings selected on your guitar, the Sheldon *TrueTone* will sound awesome. The controls in their centralised position, the overall is a warm smooth clean tone with a tad of overdrive as perfect for playing blues type lead. All this by the Celestion 30's in the cab – a great choice because of their good range and nicely shaped. Now, being quite excited about just how great this is, I decided to give the Sheldon a bit of stick in the department, and let me tell you, no need to worry about grunt – and even with the volume and gain turned right up, the *TrueTone* still stays faithful to its core for a nice extra grit and growl to the tone – the users attribute this to a small degree of cathode bias output stage (a trick borrowed from the AC30, which amps operating characteristics at higher levels from Class AB – oooh, did I say that out loud...), and of this being a 'natural' 'compression'. I use the words, because compression is a subjective term, what this is, is an alteration in the attack characteristics of the signal to a drop in current caused by the higher draw from the output stage. The addition of some Freeze and 'Sauce its brightness, the tone, left my guitar ringing with a chiming, mid-range for what almost seemed forever – eventually into feedback, which was great fun to play with. Having used the *TrueTone* in all its glory, one thing keeps coming to mind: what a great amp for recording with, especially if your sound is that pro sound for your next demo, that's going to

set you on the way to stardom.

(Note: For a detailed description of the thinking behind the Sheldon's construction, and a description of the charms of 'Class A' – and some myth de-bunking too – check out www.sheldonamps.com and go to the 'amptalk' section

CONCLUSION

The Sheldon *TrueTone* is a clever mixture of old school warm smooth tones and the ability to cut through with strong mids when the need arises. It has a nicely juiced up retro look, with some daring use of materials and strong styling, which I personally like – I do however think some of the traditionalists out there will have to be guided towards some of the less eye-catching options from the custom shop catalogue. However you feel about Sheldon's slightly daring aesthetic choices, there's no question about the *TrueTone* being an amp that's built to last – I couldn't fault the overall quality.

This high level of quality also carries on to the guts of this amp, with the valve configurations and clever little gizmo's to reduce transformer hum and RF noise, the output tone that's generated is as warm and inviting as a sleeping bag is to an Alaskan naturalist. Some of the tones that can be achieved from the *TrueTone* are really quite something, like having every cutting, bluesy lead tone you've ever wanted, all wrapped in extra soft silk for when you really need to pull them out of the bag. The downside of course, is that all this cost money – which leads me to the price tag of this rig.

Firstly, the 2x 12 cab is retailed at £599, which I hear you say isn't too bad, and secondly the head will set you back another £1099, that makes a grand total of £1698, which will register as very expensive for many a muso, but not all – as there is an undoubted market for quality such as this and many a gigging muso who would consider a well-constructed, modern valve amp like this (that could stand the rigours of the road much better than many a vintage design) as an investment in their trade. Yes, expensive it maybe, but you're getting what you pay for, a truly fantastic sounding amp that delivers great tones, is built to last, and – something that is truly to be applauded in these times – is all made here in the UK – save for a few less-than-vital styling component, and the valves you shove in it. So if you're in the market for a high-end amp with more cream than sugar, look no further, take one of these for a test drive.

The Score

KEYNOTES

- Hand-made class AB amplifier and custom cabinet containing 2x12" Celestion 30's
- 50 Watts maximum output with variable Triode/pentode operation to alter output power and characteristics
- All-valve output stage (4x Valves) with adjustable bias to allow customisation of valve choice
- Switchable boost channel w/ included footswitch

Price: Head £1099
Cabinet £599

HIGH NOTES

- ▲ Great range of bluesy tones from laid back smooth rhythm to a really cutting lead
- ▲ Cool looks – but if they're not your bag, they can be tailored to taste
- ▲ Built to last with point to point hand-wired circuit cards and eyelet construction on thick phenolic board
- ▲ British built by Jove!

LOW NOTES

- ▼ Price could be considered a high one
- ▼ I'll probably never own one!

Sheldon: (0121) 743 1504
www.sheldonamps.com

Little M

Small can be more than beautiful, it can be totally massive. Simon Croft gives his ears a sonic workout

Why should I want one?

Once you've heard this amp you'll know the answer. If you're an electric guitarist, you'll probably want one

If you're one of those people who has a look at the pics, scans the intro and then decides whether a product review is for you, stop right here and let me share something. Unless you have heard – or better still, played – the Sheldon TrueTone 3 combo, you have no idea whether you'll want one of these or not. You certainly have no idea of the sonic clout an amp rated at 3W RMS max can deliver. So trust me, read on.

Before we get into this, I should explain that I have played many valve amps before. I've owned the archetypal 100W and 50W heads. At one time or another, I've owned two famous British combos in their 30W as well as 15W varieties and I learned to play on a valve WEM Westminster, which was rated at about 5W, from memory.

But none of those amps prepared me for the experience of playing the Sheldon TrueTone 3. Intrigued? I will explain all.

The package

Before we treat our ears, let's just give our eyes a feast and learn a little about what Sheldon is offering. If you haven't come across the company before, it is a small-scale manufacturer that also has a shop based in Sheldon near Birmingham. It makes a range of valve amps, with the emphasis on hand-building and traditional values, combined with some surprisingly innovative ideas.

As you've probably gathered from the pictures of the TrueTone 3 and the asking price, this is not going to be most guitarists' first amp. In fact, the build and sound quality – as well as some of the innovative features – are up there with Sheldon's larger amp heads.

The plywood cabinet of the TrueTone 3 is covered in black Tolex with metal corner protectors. To give you some idea of scale, the width is 550mm and that's a Celestion G12 Vintage 30 you can see behind the metal grille.

Although, at 12mm, the ply used in the construction of the TrueTone 3 is thinner than you would find in most larger cabinets, it's certainly a much more durable material than the MDF used in many budget combos.

It's also proportional to the weight of the components inside the box.

Picking the combo up using the centre handle (a comfortable design using a centre spring and a thick, clear outer sheath), I'd guess the weight was only about 10kg. When you bear in mind the mains and output transformers, the metal amp chassis and the speakers, it's not a lot to lug.

Then there are the valves of course – and the TT3 has no less than five of them in its design. Sheldon uses the respected Groove Tube valves throughout. There is a pair of 6T12AX7s in the preamp and three 6AU6s in the power section. The use of these valves in the power stage is unusual because you'd normally find them in a preamp – but bear in mind that this amp does not have a high wattage rating.

More unusual still are the controls. Between the input socket on one side of the control panel and the mains socket and fuse on the other are just four rotary controls. These are: Gain, Compass, Freeze and Master. Most players will understand the idea that gain controls the amount of drive into the front end while the master controls the amount of volume coming from the power stage. The two controls in between, however, are worthy of further explanation.

Sheldon's manual says: "The Compass control is a unique and amazingly wide-ranging tone control that can take you from deep, resonant lows to needle-sharp highs with the turn of a single control." If that sounds like marketing speak to you, then let me make clear that I don't think the description does the design justice. Why? I'll give you my take on what it does later on in this review.

The Freeze control also has an affect on tone but perhaps not in the way you might think. Two classic valve amplifier designs are Class A and Class A/B. Of the two, Class A is technically the more hi-fi but Class A/B is the one that allows higher volume levels. What's really unusual about the TT3 is that it will run as a Class A, or Class A/B – or anywhere in between – depending where the Freeze control is set. ▶



monster

Sheldon TrueTone 3 combo
SRP: £499
Tel: +44 (0)121 743 1504
www.sheldonamps.com





Go...

"Home recording would be an ideal application, I considered sagely. Ha, ha, ha! I might as well have gotten into a Mini Cooper thinking it was designed as the ideal shopping run-around for my Mum. This thing may be small but bloody hell, it's got some poke!"

This explains why the amp is described as being 1-3W. With the Freeze control turned fully counter-clockwise, the amp is a Class A delivering 1W, while at the other extreme, it is a Class A/B delivering 3W. Did I say extreme? You're about to find out why.

The delivery

My early impressions of the TT3 were that it was well put together and gave out a vintage vibe, while offering something original. For instance, the controls use the old-style but very practical chicken-head knobs. However, they sit on a blue metal control panel, which sets its own look.

Similarly, the front of the cabinet only has grille within the circle described by the 12" Celestion speaker, but it's a tough metallic mesh that's there for more than just show – it will also protect the cone against almost anything apart from criminal damage.

About one third of the back is covered, leaving the valves visible below the bottom of the cover. But each valve is housed in its own metal 'can', protecting it from radio interference and lessening the chance of mechanical damage.

The bottom two-thirds of the cabinet is completely open, making it impossible to store effects pedals there. Good thinking Sheldon! Guitarists often use the bottom 'shelf' of open-backed combos as storage space. Then the combo gets put face down in a car or van. The various pedals and leads start to shift around and eventually, the speaker or valves get damaged. On the TT3, the temptation is removed. (So is the back panel on page 62!)

In case you're wondering what happens to the mains lead, it's a captive type and that is a Velcro loop you can see at the bottom of the cab to keep it neatly stored out of trouble's way.

Everything I had seen so far led me to expect a quiet and polite little amp with perhaps a nod in the direction of a couple of mellow but respected classics. Home recording would be an

ideal application, I considered sagely. Ha, ha, ha! I might as well have jumped into a Mini Cooper thinking it was designed as the ideal shopping run-around for my Mum. This thing may be small but bloody hell, it's got some poke!

To try this amp out, I used a junior-type guitar fitted with one P90 pickup, plus a volume and a tone control. Leaning forward, I switched on the power, which is 'Go' in Sheldon-speak. A pretty blue light came on.

'Hmmm, that's funny,' I thought, 'the mains hum is a little louder than I would have expected – more like a much bigger amp. I've turned up the gain but there's nothing come out of the speaker, I'd better turn up the master to see if... ahhh!' Silly me, I'd turned up the master volume just as the valves warmed up. It was about as sensible as kicking Godzilla up the arse for a schoolboy bet.

In case you ain't got it yet, the Sheldon TT3 is a seriously loud amp. It will make your average 15W practice amp sound like a bloke on the bus listening to his personal stereo. If you use the TT3 in your bedroom without due care and attention, there's a good chance it will throw your TV out of the window, then try to phone room service for a bottle of Jack Daniels.

On full throttle, this amp is so loud that my ears were ringing a few minutes later and they still are a bit. That was some hours ago. I know that wattage and sound pressure level are two completely different things but I have no idea how an amp of this rating makes so much noise, especially when it is coupled with a speaker that has been designed for its tone, rather than devastating efficiency.

Of course, all of this prodigious volume would be impressive but completely useless if the TT3 didn't sound any good. Fortunately, it's a versatile and great sounding amp. Once I got over the initial shock, I was soon dialling up some inspiring sounds. ▶

The Compass control isn't as weird as it sounds on paper and it gives you on one dial what would probably take three or four EQ controls on some amps. I'm not sure exactly how it works but wherever you set it, you get a very usable tone contour.

As the name implies, the control is based on the points of the compass. That might seem a novel idea but it has one massive advantage – very soon, you learn to associate the main control positions with your perception of the tonal qualities, not someone else's labels.

Yes, it's true that Compass does more than conventional tone controls but that doesn't mean that SW is all muddy bass while SE is ear-stripping treble. Far from it. What seems to be happening is that you are altering the relative proportions of two desirable sound characteristics, giving you loads of usable settings anywhere in-between.

To my ear, the SW position has a large amount of the kind of low-end emphasis you get using a closed 4 x 12 cabinet, rather than say, an open-backed 2 x 12. It's almost like an 'inside the cabinet' sound. Round at the other end of the control, SE gives you a revealing, brighter sound, such as you get when you mic a speaker from the front of the cabinet, or put your ear to the back of your guitar while you are playing.

Somewhere around North is a more-or-less equal balance of the two ingredients. With this particular guitar, the centre point was a little too bright for me to describe it was neutral but with almost 360° of fantastic tones to choose from, I'm in no way complaining.

Then there's the Freeze control. At one end of the range the amp is pure Class A and sounds quieter but also softer. At the other end, it's louder but also more dynamic as the circuit become Class A/B. Many players I know have read about different amp designs and think they prefer Class A but when they use their ears, they just love the responsive performance of Class A/B design. The Sheldon TT3 is the only amp I have used that not only allows you to have either but to combine them as you choose. More importantly, the Freeze control is simple to use,

so to be honest, you'd be best off leaving all that theoretical baggage behind and using your ears as your guide.

This brings me to the relationship between the gain, the master volume and your guitar. Although the TT3 is potentially a very loud amp, you can set the gain up high and the master down low to get raunchy sounds at the kind of levels you can talk over. Or you can leave the gain low and get very clean sounds at loud levels. Whatever, when you hit those strings, the amp responds so fast you almost blink.

To me, the most exciting thing is when you combine all the TT3's capabilities with your guitar. Like all great valve amps, all the controls are inter-dependent and interact with the way your guitar is set. After a short while, you and the gear just work together to get the sound you're after – whether for the whole song or each individual note.

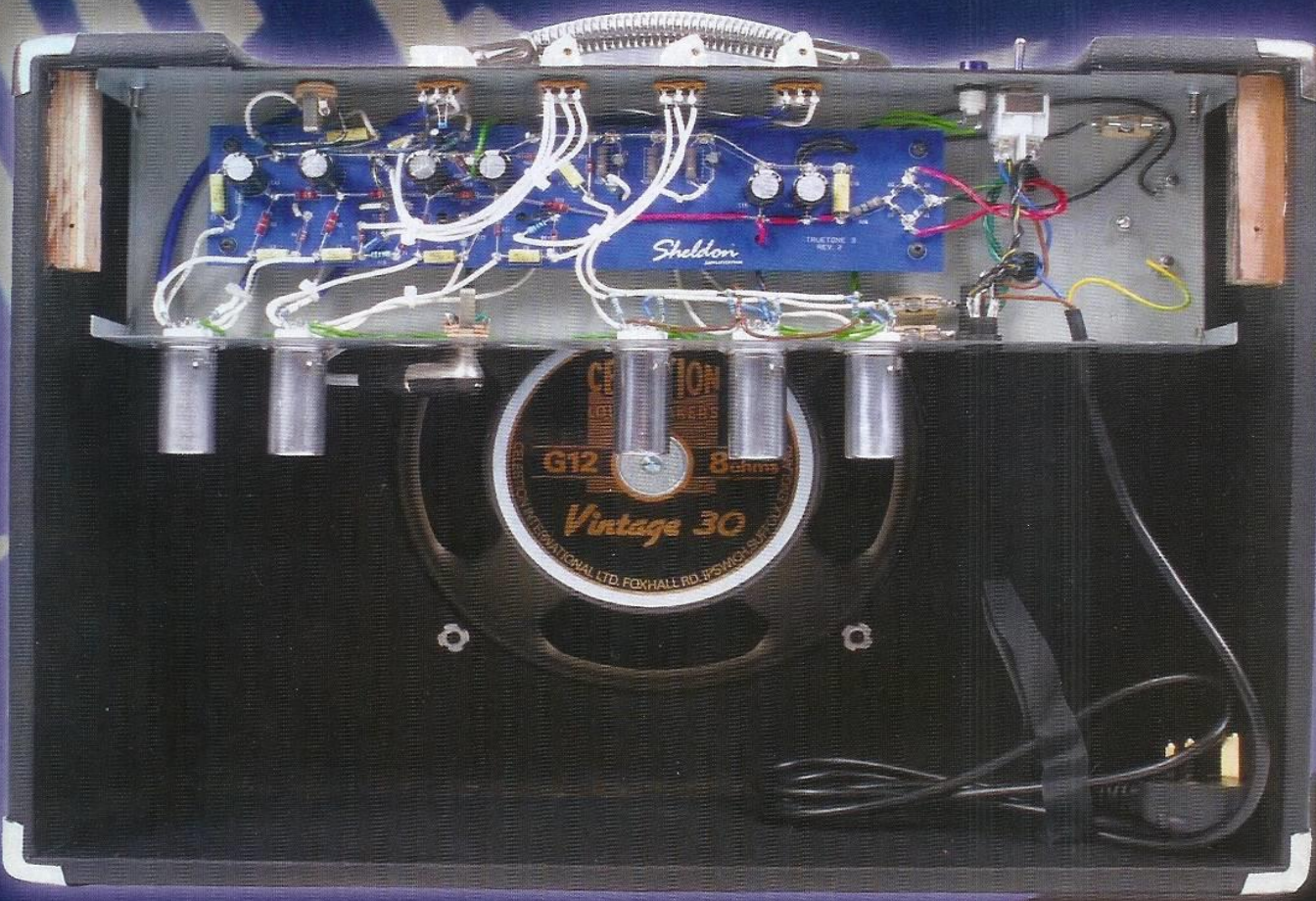
Just by using the volume control on your guitar, or how hard you hit the strings, you can go from clean to distorted – as well as shades in between. This is an expressive amplifier.

Sign for goods

Overall, I was really impressed with this amp. Forget wattage as a reference point for volume. When you hit those strings, your guitar outputs a massive voltage peak that not every amplifier can reproduce. The TT3 can, hence its colossal output and responsive performance.

If you had said to me before I took delivery of this amp that I could get massive dynamics, big tone and even sustaining feedback from a 1-3W amp, I'd have been very sceptical. But the Sheldon TrueTone 3 delivers that and a lot more. However, if you are tempted to own this amp – as I was – you're too late to get it. The TT3, serial number 0044, that I played is already sold. The good news is that you can get one just like it on order.

Sheldon offers 18W and 50W amps as well and if it wasn't for the tonal excellence of the TrueTone 3, I would find this knowledge very scary. As it is, I just can't wait to find out what kind of seismic activity I can start in my area! **PM**



RECORDING WORKSHOP

Recording electronic music at home is cheap and simple - if you have the right equipment. However, if you want to record your band - complete with real drums and really loud guitars - things ain't so easy. Huw Price explains how to make the best use of a humble practice room...

Thrill Of SPILL



TRUE BLUE

NO LONGER DO YOU NEED TO RELY ON THE SUN AND STARS TO FIND YOUR WAY. THESE DAYS SHELDON IS SHOWING THE RIGHT DIRECTION WITH SOME GLOWING VALVES AND A COMPASS. **PAUL SALTER** ASKS IF TRUETONE IS THE WAY TO GO

GEINFO

SHELDON TT3 COMBO

PRICE: £499.99

BUILT IN: UK

TYPE: 1x12 valve combo

POWER: Three watts

VALVES: Two 12AX7, three 12AU7 (all Groove Tubes, and can be substituted with optional varieties – contact Sheldon Amplification for details)

FEATURES: Single channel, Freeze control, Compass tone control

SPEAKER: Celestion G12 Vintage 30

DIMENSIONS: 406(h) x 559(w) x 254(d) mm

CONTACT:

Sheldon Amplification

PHONE: 01217 431504

WEB: www.sheldonamps.com

... Choosing an amp to suit your needs is a task and a half, and no mistake. Digital amps have occasionally been referred to as the Swiss Army knives of the amp world, and while the modelling amps we've seen so far have been totally useless at opening tins of beans, the analogy holds up: it's an invaluable tool that can manage all manner of tasks, even if you can't work out what you're supposed to use the pointy bit with the hole in for.

However, anyone who's tried to put together a flat-pack wardrobe with a simple screwdriver is still more efficient at getting the screws good and tight.

The guys at Sheldon amps understand all about the concept of having the right tool for the job, and to prove it they've hand-built a whole range of all-valve combos and heads designed to offer uncompromising tone with a workman-like approach.

We have the smallest combo of the UK-built bunch here; a studio-friendly three-watter with some rather intriguing features.

PRE & POWER AMP

The backward-facing control panel of the TrueTone 3 seems sparsely populated at first glance, but there are a few pleasant surprises that belie the simple retro vibe. Apart from the master and gain controls this is a fairly unconventional set-up, as the remaining controls may suggest. For a start, traditional approaches to EQ selection have been dismissed in favour of the 'compass', which acts as a kind of variable filter offering a progressive range of useful tones, rather than cutting or boosting a particular group of frequencies.

However, the enigmatically named 'freeze' control is perhaps the key to understanding the concept and operation of the TT3, and it's all to do with operating class. In very general (and not strictly correct) terms,



SAGGY BOTTOM?

THE ELUSIVE NATURAL COMPRESSION

■ An important concept of the TT3 is that the power amp section should sweeten-up with a touch of 'sag' when pushed hard, but still remain tight, especially in the low frequencies. A tall order indeed, but Sheldon has approached the problem by

fitting a well-specced transformer and a valve-biasing configuration that combines the fixed- and the cathode-bias methods. In other words, it's a kind of hybrid class A, class A/B setup to deliver the most desirable characteristics of each type.

valve-powered guitar amps are configured in either Class A or Class A/B operation. (If you want to read about operating class in more detail, see www.aikenamps.com/ClassA.htm). Again very roughly speaking, small tweed Vintage Fenders, Vox AC30s, Matchless and a few others are usually 'class A', whereas the vast majority of everything else – Marshalls, most Fenders, Boogies, etc – are class A/B.

The reason we're interested is because there's a difference in the way

"YOU CAN HAVE GOOD TONE AND STILL STAY FRIENDS WITH THE NEIGHBOURS"

each setup responds, and consequently sounds and feels. With the TT3, courtesy of the Freeze control, we can progressively switch between these single-ended (class A) and push/pull modes (class A/B), and in theory achieve a blend to suit all tastes.

Any valve-amp fan will tell you that you need to crank up the volume to get the

benefit of either configuration, and because this amp is intended for studio and home use, the selection of tubes is chosen accordingly. These are a pair of 12AX7s in the preamp, and rather unusually, three 12AU7s in the power amp. This gives an output rating of one watt in single-ended mode, or at the other extreme of the Freeze control, three watts in push-pull mode. It's all clever stuff, and it does mean that you can have a good tone and still stay friends with the neighbours.

Inside the amp chassis is a quality collection of components; most of which are arranged on a quality, custom-designed board. The bulky stuff – pots, porcelain tube sockets, transformers – are chassis-mounted, which is where you want them in case of failure/repair. The whole lot looks meticulous; a world away from the mass-produced, complicated PCB setups inside most modern amps.

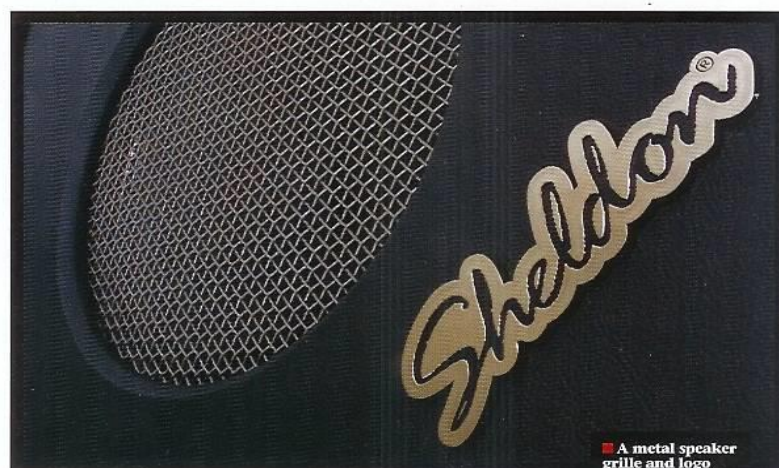
CABINET & SPEAKER

The choice of speaker and cabinet design is massively important to quality tone, and with just three watts on tap the result could have easily been something approaching bog-standard practice amp dimensions with an 8-inch no-name speaker. However, behind the TT3's metal mesh grill is a beefy Celestion G12 Vintage 30 speaker, the speaker you'll find specced in a wide range of high-quality amplifiers. It's a

relatively efficient design compared

with the G75T and Greenback for example, so will deliver plenty of volume, even from just one single watt.

The cabinet itself is of solid-feeling ply, covered in smart black vinyl and finished with chrome corner protectors. It's not meticulous – the amp chassis isn't 100 per cent square



■ A metal speaker grille and logo will fare well over years to come



■ Blue, chrome, black and cream makes for an upmarket look

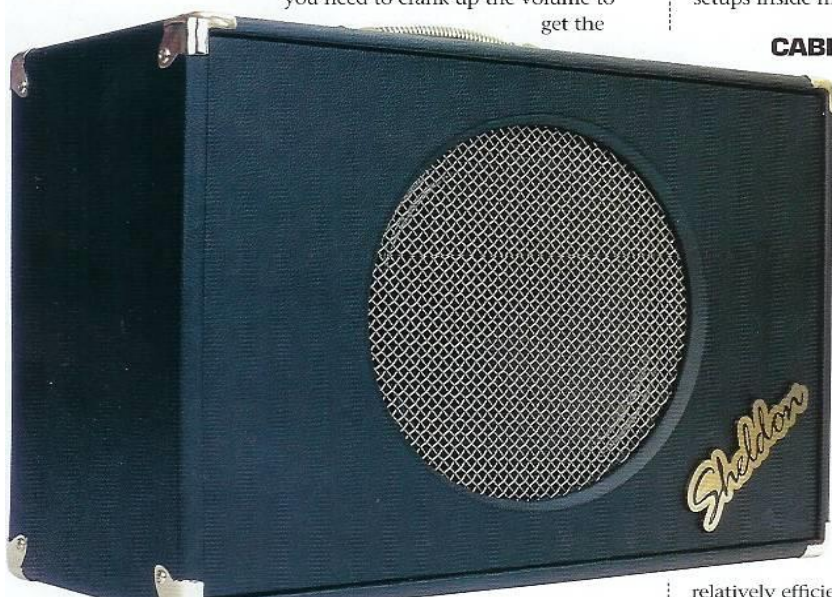
with the cab and the inside of the cabinet looks a little unfinished in places – but it is very tidy. Top marks for the Hughes & Kettner-style carry handle and the blue power light, both of which add an upmarket vibe. Open back in design, it's physically bigger than, say, a MkIII Boogie, which

DIRECTION DILEMMA

ON THE SHELF?

■ Traditional tone controls comprise either individual or combinations of shelving types, which progressively cut frequencies above or below a set point, and bandpass types, which affect a group of frequencies between an upper and lower point.

The Compass control offers a lot more than you'd normally expect from a single tone control by having a 'complete' tone at every stage of its rotation. As well as sounding great, it's a doddle to change tones quickly.



DETAILS

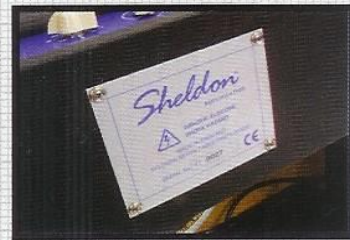
KEEP IT SIMPLE. ALTHOUGH APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEPTIVE...



■ Sparse controls mask a multitude of tones



■ Sprayed black would have looked better here



■ Hand-built means relative exclusivity



GBOPINION

SHELDON TT3 COMBO

GOLD STARS

- ★ Inspiring tones
- ★ The combination of class A and class A/B
- ★ Effective 'Compass' control

BLACK MARKS

- Only the preconception that three watts could ever be loud enough. It is

IDEAL FOR...

Gorgeous blues/rock tones at recording volume

means plenty of room for the tone to breathe, while being light and compact enough for a bus trip to the studio.

SOUNDS

Electronic explanations of the Freeze control may be a little involved if you don't really care what's under the hood, so the important thing to get your head around is that you have access to two overdrive characters, and any point in-between.

It's easy to spot the difference with the gain up full and with the Compass control set to the NW position (a cracking classic rock tone). With the Freeze at its most clockwise the texture

becomes silkier, and more integrated into the inherent sound of the guitar with a more open quality – it's also quieter as this is the one-watt setting.

Lower levels of drive are equally satisfying. With the gain set at around the three-o'clock position and the Compass set for a more northerly bite, the effect is still full, but every little detail and interval that make up a chord is present in all its harmonious glory. It screams 'valves', and you'll also have no problems with this amp masking the tone of your guitar, or for that matter what its volume and tone controls are capable of.

From the mid point of the gain control down to its lowest position there's a progressively mellowing journey from a soulful blues voice, to a sleepy, smoky jazz mumble, particularly if you point the Compass due-south. And if you're thinking 'surely it can't be loud enough', well the neighbours might not start knocking on the wall, but they might comment on how great you've started to sound if you leave the window open. Most importantly, it's the perfect volume for recording.

GBCONCLUSION

MICRO-WATTAGE, MACRO-TONES- TRY TO PUT YOUR PRECONCEPTIONS ASIDE HERE

■ Obviously an amp rated at three watts isn't going to be an appropriate choice for a full band. Surprisingly enough though, it could cope with something like a restrained jazz trio or some subdued blues in a Sunday lunchtime pub setting – we kid you not, because wattage becomes fairly meaningless with this kind of valve amp; it's amazingly efficient.

The variety of tones it can produce is impressive, and the quality of those tones even more so. It's not a contender for the Comfort Harlequin in terms of smooth rock drive, but for more vintage-type tones it's a beauty. Sheldon makes the claim in the TT3's manual that 'If ever there was an amp that you couldn't quit playing, then this is it!' Well, they won't be surprised when I don't give it back then will they! **GB**

GBRATINGS

SHELDON TT3 COMBO

PRE & POWER AMP	★★★★★
CABINET & SPEAKERS	★★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★★

"YOU'LL HAVE NO PROBLEM WITH THIS AMP MASKING THE TONE OF YOUR GUITAR"

of the drive is slightly ragged, with elements of the distortion that appear to be outside of the core tone. Wind the control back and the drive



Sheldon TrueTone amps

Who on Earth makes a 1W guitar amp? Especially when it's a valve amp? The short answer is Sheldon Amplification, a 'boutique' guitar amp builder named after the area of Birmingham where the company is based. And before you start to question that wattage, pause to consider the mighty buzz of chatter that's starting to surround the company. Oh yes, Sheldon is a new name in amplification, but it's certainly making its presence felt.

The reason why is the TrueTone range, comprising three models, ranging in power from 1W to about 50W. Each one of them can be run at more than one wattage by fitting different valves, which also affects the tone, of course.

The baby of the range is the TT3, which can be a 1W or 3W amplifier, depending how you set the 'Freeze' control. The output valves can be 12AU7s, or 12AT7s, while the preamp valves are two 12AX7s – an arrangement used in all Sheldon preamp sections.

The point of this underpowered beauty is, of course, that it allows you to wring out a ton of tonesome valve distortion at any time of day or night without the neighbours surrounding your house with lighted torches. For that blessing alone, Chris Underwood's neighbours will be thankful.

For small venues or the recording studio you may prefer a bit more welly, so Sheldon offers the TT2, an 18W "blues monster". The valves used are EL34s – a pretty impressive choice – which are available in various types, even though they all bear the same model number.

But it's the largest TrueTone amp, the TT1, that'll make you drool. Before you even hear it, you have to admit it's drop-dead gorgeous. Not only has it got a blue facia and a blue pilot light, but when the amp is on all the components inside are bathed in blue light as well, creating the kind of beautiful effect capable of attracting guitarists like moths to a flame.

And hey, all this and tone too...! Sheldon has put an impressive amount of work into the TrueTone sound as well. The TT1 will accommodate no less than seven different valve configurations. As standard it comes with a smooth and

creamy set of four 6V6s. Alternatives include two EL34s for a classic British rock sound, four EL34s for even more of the same, four 6L6s for more of a bluesy sound... We think you get the idea. Incidentally, all Sheldon amps come fitted with Groove Tube valves. Different valves require different bias settings but Sheldon tells you how to set the bias yourself, without taking the amp apart. We think this is a neat feature.

If you think Sheldon amps look original, just wait to you get to grips with some of its unique controls. We've all heard of treble and bass but what are 'Compass' and 'Special Sauce' all about? Well, Compass is a variable tone rotary that's easier to use than explain. Set at North, it's not emphasising any particular frequency. Going towards SW adds a little sparkle, while SE adds sparkle and grind, with an upper mid boost.

Special Sauce is used in conjunction with a footswitch and affects the sound of the boost setting. How it does so is quite unusual, in that it adjusts the extent to which the tone controls affect the boosted sound, versus the amp's natural sound.

The 'Freeze' control is another interesting feature, reducing the amount of high end on the amp as a whole, making it sound a bit more vintage. Or, as Sheldon puts it, changing from "icy sharp to smooth and mellow". Further on, the standby and on switches are marked, 'Ready' and 'Go'.

Conversely, things are a little more serious inside the amp: there are no printed circuit boards because Sheldon uses the old-fashioned 'point-to-point' wiring method, which tone purists swear by.

Because of the amount of hand building, boutique amps are generally very expensive, especially if they come all the way from sunny California. Sheldon are not cheap but they are affordable to guitarists who are serious about their sound. The TT1 comes in a number of variants and starts at a little over £1,000, with matching cabs from about £400. The TT2 head is less than £1,000 and is available as a combo for about £1,200. The TT3 is £499. All the models also have custom options available.

www.trueoneamps.com