

DIAMOND SPEC OP £2,299
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMANDA THOMAS

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Something genuinely new to the world of high-end, high-gain all-tube amplification: a 24-carat tone machine that lights up blue *by Simon Bradley*

Even in today's market, those players who crave high gain tones can feel demeaned by much of the choice of similarly high-end, all-tube amps. Matchless, Bad Cat, Divided By 13, Trainwreck and more are beautiful pieces of work, but rarely are they used – or indeed suited – for downtuned mayhem and associated metal styles.

So, with the be-cobwebbed vintage guys catered for, where would you go if your needs extended even beyond a Boogie Triple Rectifier: one answer would be this very amp, a 100-watt all-tube head that was the first production unit designed by Diamond mainman Jeff Diamant.

Speaking from the company's Houston HQ, Jeff gave us an insight into the birth of the Spec Op. "I had been working with [fleet-fingered US technician] Rusty Cooley and he was expressing what was a relatively common problem. The tone he used for his low junky chord progression stuff was too muddy and gainy for the intricate staccato-style passages, and he wanted an amp that sounded good for both. The sounds were inconsistent as one required more gain than the other and, at the time, the only real solution was to interface with more than one amp. So I came up with the idea of an amp that kept its basic tone but allows you to have a dual volume and gain design."

Channel phwoaar...

In traditional terms we'd have to describe the Spec Op as a twin channel head, even though the provision of two sets of volume and gain pots on that second channel had led to portrayals of a three-channel affair.

Channel one is intended for clean use (although it does overdrive nicely, as we'll find out), while channel two gives the opportunity for two wholly separate output and gain levels.

"I would define it as a two and a

half channel amp, because there's not really a third channel; there aren't separate tone controls," says Jeff. "The two volume and gain controls won't alter your tone as they're not voiced differently, and flipping from A to B is just like turning the dial to another setting. So, in that way you get more than one sound but still share the basic tone. We tie bright caps to the gain controls that kick in at about five, so, when you bring the gain down, you're not necessarily going to lose gain but you will brighten up the amp and give it more of a Marshall vibe."

This versatility is enhanced by the provision of a master boost function, controlled by a dedicated pot to the left of the front panel and activated either by the included four-way footswitch or a micro-switch on the panel.

This arrangement therefore allows for three distinct tones to be on hand, these can then be further hiked in volume for solos and the like.

Round the back is a rotary 'low focus' pot with three settings: low, mid and high. As Jeff explains, it will also have a significant effect on the tones already dialled in.

"That's designed to change the overall way the amp sounds on any of the channels," he says.

"What's really happening is that we're messing with the negative feedback that's rolled back into the sound of the amplifier. The low position is sort of your standard amplifier wiring configuration, and as you move up to mid or high it'll sound as if you've boosted your bass to give a fuller sound. That's not actually what's happening, but that is the

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overall effect created.

"So, the amp will sound bigger, it'll be fuller and will breathe better; it'll also make the note ring a little more evenly," he continues. "If you hit your low E it should ring at the same volume as your high E, but for most amps the low E overpowers the high. It gives the illusion of increased low end, even though we're not actually boosting the bass."

The lack of a master volume, something we'd noticed with furrowed brow, is overcome by another interesting design feature. The Spec Op features an unusual effects loop that, when engaged, allows you to use the E Return pot as a master irrespective of whether an FX unit is also linked in or not.

"A few other people have done it," Jeff tells us. "It's not the customary design but is, in my opinion, the best design of how to run an effects loop. When you engage the loop you now have two sets of controls: the channel volumes become your effects sends and the effects return is exactly that. What you're really doing is adjusting the amount of effect return, which is going to have an overall volume implication to the amp."

The Rivals

Versatility and flexibility remains the name of the game as far as fully-pro valve-driven heads go. The **Mesa Stiletto Deuce** (£1,975) is arguably closer to the Diamond in tone and vibe than the crunchmongous Rectifier series. Each channel offers three tones and there's a solo function too. The MIDI-friendly **Rivera Knucklehead 100** (£1,899) is most players' idea of a fully-formed high-gain amp. There are three channels that benefit from the company's Tri-Tone circuit that includes all manner of push/pull controls for added tonality; also included is the innovative Headmaster footswitch system. Beating the Spec Op in the 'lights up blue' stakes, **Hughes & Kettner's Trilogy** (£1,199) also includes three channels of varying tone. Slightly more subdued in the gain stakes, it's certainly a great all-round amp that also boasts MIDI functionality.

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A sturdy grille of 16-gauge stainless steel keeps the innards both protected and cooled, while blue LEDs add a unique final touch of style.

Jeff chuckles as we ask if they affect the amp in any way. "LEDs do not introduce any noise and so don't have the problems that incandescent, fibre-optic or edge lighting does; they don't actually draw much current either," he says. "The plate voltage of that amp is about 470 volts DC and it takes 12 volts to power the LEDs."

Sounds

Jeff suggested that, to begin with, we set the amp up as follows: "Set all of the controls to five and bring the bass down a little bit, and then run channel 2A's volume and gain up to about six each. When you hit six on the channel volume you'll hear the amp open up a little bit more, and then you can set the effects return knob. Start at about one or two and then bring it up to the desired volume."

The tone, although full of gain, is extremely impressive in its clarity and Jeff's prediction of ultimate string separation is proved correct: even with extreme down-tuning, the clarity remains up close and personal.

Most metal players will need rhythm and solo tones, which the Spec Op provides, and the boost function, which heaps up to 20dB onto your sound, gives as much headroom as any widdler would ever need.

The low focus control is a powerful tone shaping tool. We find the best high-gain tones are with the switch set to mid or high. Winding down the gain and upping the mids to offer a more restrained bluesy or classic rock voice benefits from switching the 'focus' to low in order to smooth out some of the tone's brashness.

The clean channel is more a matter of taste; generally 'modern' in flavour with the ability for that visceral clean power that you rarely find in a classic or vintage-style amp. The downside is a little loss in character of your guitar, the upside is more than ample headroom to get you heard. By using the effect loop return as a master volume, however, you can



also push the volume and gain to coax a more organic feeling tone for blues and similar styles, with a good dollop of expressive valve compression and bloom.

Verdict

We've used the car analogy many times in an attempt to convey that, at this end of the market, price is a secondary consideration for serious potential users. The law of diminishing marginal returns kicks hard when you're talking American-made, high quality, relatively low production... It's, cough, how much? Indeed, if the total price for head and cab of £2,978 is out of your reach, you won't have made it this far through the review.

Yes, the Spec Op represents a very expensive commitment but we have to say that, with a little time spent setting the controls just right, the high-gain tones are among the best we've ever heard. Fuller and rounder than a Rectifier's red channel, and more articulate than anything we found in the Krankenstein, this is a pro unit that guitarists in bands as diverse as 311 and The Wailers use with gusto.

There's a huge buzz around these amps at the moment – will you let this Diamond shine?

The bottom line

We like: The quality of the high gain tone plus the open-ended versatility; the fact that the rig looks so cool doesn't hurt either!

We dislike: It costs more than some of its better known rivals – it's a pity it's so expensive...

Guitarist says: For modern metal and rock styles, this is something special. Is it worth more than a comparable Boogie, Randall, Rivera or Hughes & Kettner rig? That's for you to choose.

Diamond Spec Op

PRICE: £2,299

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All valve twin-channel head

OUTPUT: 100W

CABINET: 11-ply Baltic birch

VALVES: Four Svetlana EL34, seven TungSol 12AX7

CHANNELS: Two

CONTROLS: Channel 1: volume, gain, bass, middle, treble and presence
Channel 2: two sets of switchable volume and gain controls, master bass, middle, treble and presence pots. Master effects level and boost level

FOOTSWITCH: Four-way included

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Boost function, three-position 'low focus' switch, mono effects loop, blue chassis LEDs, three alternate switching jacks

OPTIONS: The optional half-rack MAC-2 (£169) allows you to control the head's functions via any MIDI device

RANGE OPTIONS: The Diamond Phantom, a two-channel 100-watt head, complete with a green lighting theme, costs £2,099

CABINET: The reviewed Diamond 212 cab (£679) features 11-ply Baltic birch construction, 16-gauge stainless steel grille, removable castors and two Celestion Vintage 30s; the Diamond Spec Op 4 x 12 cab costs £949

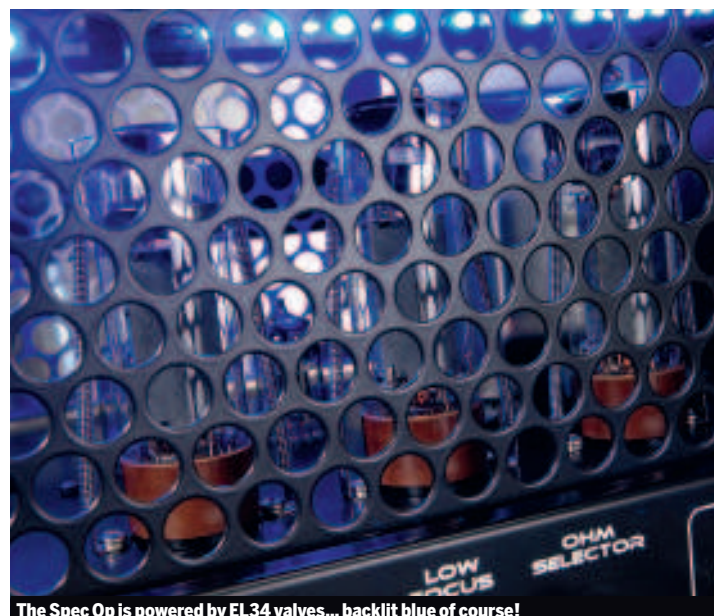
First Line 01626 830336

www.diamondamplification.com

Test results

Build quality	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★☆☆

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



The Spec Op is powered by EL34 valves... backlit blue of course!

With a little time spent setting the controls just right, the high-gain tones are among the best we've ever heard