



Engl E635
Fireball 100

Peavey
6505+

Group Test

Hard rock half stack amplifiers

If you're playing heavy music, you'll want an equally heavy amp. The favoured tool for the job is a half stack, so we've lined up four that will make sure you drown out your drummer!

WORDS **STUART WILLIAMS**



Blackstar®

Blackstar
Series One 100

Hughes & Kettner
Switchblade TSC



Flip the page to
find out which one
won our Group Test
head-to-head

When it comes to tone, your greatest voice is arguably your amp. Sure, you'll want to pick a guitar that comes readied with the features you'll need to pull off the styles you want to begin with, but your choice of amplifier will have a huge influence on defining your overall sound. The options available leave this decision wide open, so we've narrowed the boundaries and prepared this month's Group Test for those who are looking for a high-gain valve amp that's a workhorse for gigging.

For rock, punk and metal, the sound of a valve amp haemorrhaging into saturation is still considered by many to be the foundation of a great tone. In olden days, the sound of a distorted electric guitar was regarded to be neither big, nor clever but as gigs got bigger, the music got louder and guitarists started to push their amps to

breaking point just to be heard – and thus the sound of rock guitar was born. By the time the 80s rolled round, amps featuring extra gain stages had arrived, making heavily distorted guitar sounds achievable without the use of stompboxes.

We've lined up four similarly priced heads and their respective speaker cabinets that are capable of peeling skin, but you'd be forgiven for thinking that having enough gain to inflict an aneurism is going to be enough to win alone. All four amps in the group are heavy hitters, but what we're looking for is versatility and as much monstrous tone as we can get to the pound. ■

**"WE'RE LOOKING FOR
VERSATILITY AND
MONSTROUS TONE"**



Peavey 6505+

Ready Eddie?

£780
(cab)

£1,182
(head)

Valves
The 6505+ delivers crushing gain courtesy of no less than six valves in the preamp stage



Head
The 6505+ is based on Peavey's original 5150 design and is a popular amp for heavy music

Build
The design is spawned from a classic and boasts an impressive list of users

At a glance

Peavey 6505+

OUTPUT: 120 watts
SPEAKER: 4x12" Peavey Sheffield 1200
VALVES: 6x 12AX7, 4x 6L6GC
CONTROLS: Channel switches, pre gain, EQ, post gain, resonance, presence
SOCKETS: Speaker, footswitch, FX loop, pre out
WEIGHT: 21.9kg (head); 43kg (cab)
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] (head) 260x673x300mm; (cab) 822x762x360mm
CONTACT: Peavey 01536 461234
WEB: www.peavey.co.uk

Back in 1991 a tap-happy Eddie Van Halen and Peavey came up with a high-gain amp design called the 5150. It would go on to become a staple for high-gain guitar tones, with Trivium, Bullet For My Valentine and Machine Head among its user base.

At the end of 2004, however, Edward Van decamped from Peavey and founded the EVH brand, taking the 5150 with him. So Peavey relaunched the amp that year, introducing the 6505 – and the 6505+, which features



an extra 12AX7 valve (making a total of six) in the preamp stage.

An amp with as much heritage as this could make it easy for you to form preconceptions. It has the highest count in the group when it comes to preamp valves

and on paper it's eyeing the prize before we even start. The clean channel delivers a bit of colour to the sound as it starts to break up, but the real winners here are the Crunch and Lead channels. From the former, you can conjure 'on the edge' drive sounds through to punky crunch tones and beyond.

Kick into the Lead channel, however, and you tap into the heavy metal mother lode. Crank it up a bit for a low end kick from the cab that sounds amazing in isolation, but overdo that EQ in a

band setting and you might find it to be a little too flabby.

Conclusion: The 6505+ sounds the most hi-fi in the group; you get a rounded out sound that's still sharp enough to cut if you tweak the presence control. It misses out on the gold in this test, but only just.

SUMMARY

For: Massive sounds, tried and tested
Against: Cab can sound a bit woolly

★★★★☆

TG says: An eruption of tone

Hughes & Kettner Switchblade TSC

That's not a knife!

£725
(cab)

£1,399
(head)

Logo
H&K's usual illuminated logo has been replaced by a more rock looking badge



Controls
The Switchblade's build quality is more than sturdy enough for gigging with

TSC
The TSC technology will make sure the Switchblade is always reliable onstage

At a glance

Hughes & Kettner Switchblade

OUTPUT: 100 watts
SPEAKER: 4x Celestion G12M
VALVES: 2x 12AX7, 4x EL34
CONTROLS: Volume, FX, presence, EQ, gain, mode
SOCKETS: Speaker, FX loop, MIDI, footswitch
WEIGHT: 17.6kg (head); 41kg (cab)
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] (head) 286x750x258mm; (cab) 750x750x360mm
CONTACT: Headline Music 01223 874301
WEB: www.hughes-and-kettner.com

Hughes & Kettner's mantra is 'Technology of Tone'; the company clearly swears by it. The Switchblade has been around for a few years, but its latest incarnation is packed with features you'd expect from NASA, not an amp builder.

The TSC (Tube Safety Control) monitors the valve performance and continuously re-biases your amp. The result is longer-lasting valves that give optimum performance. It even



lets you run the amp at half power if a valve blows mid-set, and you can save up to 128 different amp settings that can be recalled using the footswitch. It's also the only amp in the test

with digital effects onboard. It's clever – and it delivers.

The awesome build quality is immediately impressive; the pots move with a reassuring weight and the large chicken head mode selector stands out among the other controls. Tone wise, you get classic punk, hard rock and a slaying metal from this bad boy. With the gain cranked high the Switchblade becomes a little muddy but a boost with the presence control clears it up into a cutting metal sound.

Conclusion: Our only complaint with the Switchblade is to do with control. When you shift between radically different amp settings the control panel can become a little confusing. Besides this minor grumble, the Switchblade has proven itself to be one sharp character.

SUMMARY

For: Sounds, awesome features
Against: Control is a bit messy

★★★★☆

TG says: It's a blade-runner up!

"THE BLACKSTAR SERIES ONE 100
COVERS VINTAGE AND MODERN
TONES WITH AUTHENTICITY"

HARD ROCK HALF STACKS **★ GROUP TEST**

Engl E635 Fireball 100

Great balls of fire!

£691
(cab)

£1,369
(head)



Bottom switch
Push this in and you get a beefy low end punch, perfect for metal rhythm

Tone
Engl's latest effort pumps out some extremely aggressive metal

Noise gate
The handy built-in noise gate keeps your high-gain sounds tidy

At a glance

Engl E635 Fireball 100

OUTPUT: 100 watts
SPEAKER: 4x12" Celestion V60
VALVES: 4x 12AX7, 4x 6L6GC
CONTROLS: Clean/lead gain, EQ, master volumes, presence, noise gate
SOCKETS: Speaker, footswitch, FX loop
WEIGHT: 21 kg (head); 50kg (cab)
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] (head) 270x710x270mm; (cab) 750x740x360mm
CONTACT: The Music Force Distribution 01780 781631
WEB: www.engl-amps.com

Engl has become a recognised name in metal circles. Giving more power and added lower mid range than its 60-watt brother, the 100 is the latest addition to the range. Engl invites us to "burn up the stage" on its website. It'd be rude not to.

One look at this character and you can tell it means business. Its evilly simple in its layout and built like a tank to boot. Plug it in and you get a pleasing clean sound, but unlike some of the others here, there's less middle



ground. Pushing the Bottom switch means you don't have to crank the gain too hard for a tight heavy distortion, perfect for Hetfield-style chugging.

A quick glance at the back of the amp reveals the noise gate

control. Turn this up along with the gain and you're in noise-free extreme metal heaven. The Fireball also delivers an amazing Mesa-style low end punch to the gut that stays focused at high-gain settings.

Plus, in a similar fashion to the Switchblade amp, the Fireball lets you monitor the health of the output valves with its PTM (Power Tube Monitor) LEDs.

Conclusion: The Fireball 100 is definitely the most aggressive sounding in the group, and it's

unapologetically heavy. The sheer power it delivers places it high on the list for those who want an all-out metal amp, but if you're after a little more subtlety you might find it a bit one dimensional. With our ears ringing and eyes bleeding we were tempted to ring the bell here, but there's more.

SUMMARY

For: Powerful, aggressive metal tone
Against: More variation is available

★★★★☆

TG says: Burn baby, burn!

Blackstar Series One 100

New kids on the rock

£579
(cab)

£849
(head)



ISF
Blackstar's patented ISF control gives you classic US to UK style amp voicings

Modes
You get four all-valve amp modes packed with features at a bargain price point



DPR
The DPR control takes you from practice to stage power levels

At a glance

Blackstar Series One100

OUTPUT: 100 watts
SPEAKER: 4x Celestion V30
VALVES: 2x ECC83, 1x ECC82, 4x EL34
CONTROLS: Gain/volume, master, EQ, ISF, DPR,
SOCKETS: Speaker, footswitch, FX loop,
WEIGHT: 23.2kg (head); 49kg (cab)
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] (head) 725x285x278mm; (cab) 837x755x356mm
CONTACT: Blackstar Amplification 01536 312620
WEB: www.blackstaramps.com

This 100-watt head has a similar architecture to the 45 combo we reviewed last issue.

It has the same four modes, Blackstar's ISF feature, and the DPR (Dynamic Power Reduction) control, which reduces the output power for full tone at lower volumes. It has four EL34 valves in the power stage (the combo has two), and Celestion V30 speakers in the cab.

The four modes of the Series One 100 have pretty much every



classic amp sound covered. Shifting between them gives you shimmering cleans right through to a strutting rock 'n' roll crunch and a fully saturated, chunky metal tone. The ISF control jets

you between a Yankee bite and a smoother British tone.

As fans of Loyd Grossman we park it in the mid Atlantic position, leaning towards the US with the gain up for a bright, thumping heavy rock tone. Using the DPR control gives you power tube saturation at lower levels, and even setting it at 10 watts will be plenty loud enough for most live settings.

Conclusion: At the start we said we'd be looking for versatility and

with great tone – and we found it. There are amps here whose approach is more specialist, but if you want an amp that covers vintage and modern tones with authenticity at a price point that defies the laws of economics, the Series One will gladly bank your cheque.

SUMMARY

For: Versatile, competitive price
Against: It weighs a freakin' tonne!

★★★★★

TG says: Back in Black(star)