

it is one of the most richly toneful and vocal new production amplifiers we have ever heard or reviewed, endowed with an unmistakable personality that will be revealed to you in the first chord. There it is... stunning clarity throughout the entire frequency range of your guitar... highs that

vividly reveal second-order harmonics and subtle overtones without sounding shrill or harsh... a sonorous midrange voice that lends animation and a vocal human quality to the notes, and rich low end anchoring the choir with confidence, strength and amazing depth. All this, and the speakers aren't even broken in yet... If you live anywhere near a Dr. Z dealer, we urge you to fire up a Remedy at the first opportunity. And for those of you who don't, we can assure you that the suspense and anticipation of awaiting the arrival of your new Remedy will be entirely justified by hopeful expectations gloriously surpassed. If ever there was a time to Quest forth, this be it. **to**

www.drzamps.com

REVIEW

3rd Power Amplification



Visual Sound founder Bob Weil suggested that we consider developing a review of an amp built by 3rd Power Amplification, a fairly new player in the boutique market based in Nashville. We contacted founder

Jamie Scott, and we received a British Dream 112 combo for review. As we researched the entire 3rd Power product line of combo amps, heads and their innovative Switchback and triangular HLH 312 speaker cabinets, it became apparent that 3rd Power was working from an entirely unique perspective that has been enthusiastically embraced by players like Lenny Kravitz and Simon Townshend. We asked Jamie to describe the inspiration for his company and his unique design approach, and our review of the British Dream follows our interview...

TQR: How and when did you first become involved with music and gear, and what kinds of sonic space did you naturally gravitate to as a player that continues to influence you today?



I remember being exposed to music and sound at a very early age. My mom was hippie and always had the record player going. As a child, my favorite song was "Boris The Spider" by The Who as opposed to something like "Old McDonald!" I recall mimicking the guitar riff on George Harrison's version of "If Not for You" on an old acoustic guitar using a nickel as the slide. During the summer of

1969, my mom took me to the Seattle Pop Festival. I saw Led Zeppelin, The Doors and Bo Diddley. What I remember most of that weekend was sitting on the front of Bo's stage and him pointing at me a couple of times while singing.

As a working musician I focus on writing guitar parts that complement the song and particularly the vocals. Sonically speaking, I find that the texture of the guitar sound and how it holds together the whole song to be pretty amazing. It doesn't matter if it's U2, Springsteen, Fleetwood Mac, Foo Fighters, Hunter Hayes, Paramore or Taylor Swift, the guitar is binding it all together and allowing the vocal melody to be the centerpiece of the song.

TQR: How did your initial interest in amplification progress in terms of acquiring practical, hands-on experience from the perspective of a designer and builder?

I took electronics and computer programming classes in school. This provided me with the fundamentals as well as the understanding that electronic devices work the way they do for a reason. People had to design it and build it before it became something someone could use. Later, I worked and taught guitar at a local music store. It became my responsibility to maintain all of the guitars on the wall and eventually that led to doing guitar repairs and customizations. When it came time to tweak my old Marshall amp head, a friend recommended I go see a guy named Dave Ray. Dave had a shop across the street from the local rehearsal hall in San Rafael, CA. Over the years, I would book time with Dave and we'd just dive into my amp and see what we could come up with. Dave really made an impression on me as he passionately helped me chase the tone in my head. He taught me patience and the understanding that, with regard to electronic compo-

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nents and how they impact the sound, “everything changes everything.” I began to apply what I had learned by maintaining my band’s gear. For me, it became a ritual. I wanted the band to sound great so I made certain our gear was in top shape. I would restring, dress the frets and intonate all of our guitars. As a result, I was able to see first hand how this attention to detail impacted our recordings and performances. This fueled my fire to keep getting better.

TQR: What are some of the shortcomings in typical production amplifiers new and vintage you have set out to eliminate or improve on in the past, and how?

Decisions and compromises always make sense to the people making them. Sometimes, it’s simply the wrong person or department making the decisions that lead to complications and shortcomings in products. Other times, an amp is designed to try to make too many people happy or cover too wide an audience. Where 3RD POWER is different, aside from our proprietary technology, is that we design music products to be used for professional applications in a myriad of environments, and we’re creating them with an elegant interface and an outstanding ability to deliver the artist’s unique style, tone and emotion. Currently, we don’t make use of fancy logic systems, processors and switching relays. These devices can certainly make things more versatile. However, you pay a price in terms of ease-of-use, sound quality and potential noise, not to mention the service hassles you have down the road when they fail.

I think we have a unique approach to designing music equipment. Having engineered and mastered my fair share of recordings, I think I naturally approach it as if I’m recording a record or sweetening a mix. I make sure that various gain-stages are optimally matched and that the overall EQ is balanced and not too peaky. In my experience, if you’re just a couple of dB off on certain frequencies you can absolutely ruin an otherwise good tone. I’ve developed a few proprietary noise-reduction techniques that make a big difference in the quality and definition of the sound. I had the opportunity awhile back to see first-hand just how appreciated our products were. One time was at Nashville’s Ryman Auditorium for a Roger Daltrey show. With a grin, the soundman pulled up guitarist Simon Townsend’s channel strip (he was using our gear) and showed me on the video monitor that he had all the EQ filters bypassed! The other time was at a Goo Goo Dolls show where the same thing happened.

TQR: How did the idea for 3rd Power Amplification evolve and develop? What did you wish to do differently that would separate your products from all the other ‘custom’ or ‘boutique’ amplifiers being built today?

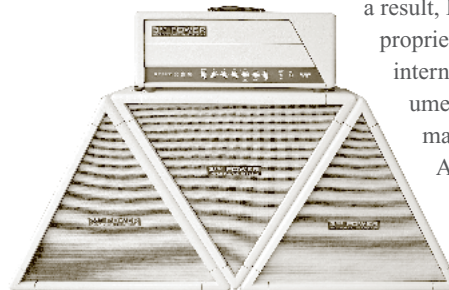
I look at the guitar amplifier as if it’s a translation device. It’s



imperative that the artist be able to convey their emotions through the music and share it with their audience. The audience in turn expresses their delight back to the artist. How effective that exchange is determines how successful the artist is. In economic terms, if the artist can effectively come across to their audience, they are more likely to sell t-shirts and CDs after the show. This means the artist can eat, fill the gas tank and do it again the next night. I am thinking in these terms when I design a piece of music equipment – making sure it contributes to the big-picture in a positive way.

TQR: Can you describe specific examples of the unique design features in your amps such as the SWITCHBACK speaker enclosure design, HybridMASTER, and other less obvious design innovations in the circuit?

Our current speaker enclosure designs are based on the HLH 312 tri-cab technology. The goal was to improve upon the legendary 4x12 speaker enclosure. For years I’ve had issues with how uneven the frequency response can be, especially in the mid-range. I studied and broke down the 4x12 to its core elements and isolated those things I did like about it. As



a result, I came up with proprietary ratios for internal cubic volume and angles that made sense to me. After building a proto-unit, I was blown away at how well

the concept translated from paper to real life. Like a 4x12, it sounded really big but the phase-combing weirdness as well as the peaky mid-range “beam” were both gone! After a few tweaks here and there, the design was complete. These proprietary elements translate incredibly well even when reducing the overall size of the enclosure and number of speakers. Our speaker enclosures do a terrific job delivering a great performance and it’s incredibly satisfying to have artists like Lenny Kravitz agreeing with us and using our products.

The SWITCHBACK element specifically came about after taking a look at how guitar was being recorded in Nashville and what players were doing at gigs. In the studio, guys were

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bringing their amp heads in the control room and setting up their speaker cabinet in the live room or isolation booth. When they needed a different tone or authentic sound, they had to switch amps and cabs. I saw an opportunity to streamline the process by allowing them to keep the cabinet and microphones positioned and simply opening up the back of the cabinet. And while this isn't a novel concept, executing it the way we do with a triangle shaped port that is actually tuned to enhance the sound, definitely sets us apart.

HybridMASTER came about after studying the various ways people were currently managing the volume of their guitar rig. I find most methods to be "brute force" solutions. Stuffing a speaker inside of a foam-lined box and closing it up is "brute force." Taking a perfectly good tube amplifier and running it into a separate power-soaking device is another example of "brute force." Digging deeper, I noticed the more popular approaches focused on and performed all the work in one specific area of the amplifier. To me, it's like driving your car down the backside of a mountain without downshifting.

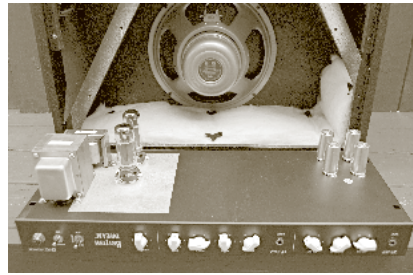
HybridMASTER is by far the best volume management solution I've ever experienced. Although proprietary, I can tell you that we bring voltage regulation, current limiting and AC



signal levels together on a single control knob. When disengaged, it's 100% out of circuit. When engaged, it effectively decouples the tone of the amp from its perceived volume. It's elegant and it's convenient.

TQR: You utilize an EF86 tube in the British Dream. How has the development and construction of this tube evolved and improved? In the not so distant past this tube has often been 'troublesome', plagued by noise and microphonics, and various 'damping' efforts have not always produced tone comparable to, say, a smooth plate vintage Mullard.

I don't know if the perfect EF86 tube exists with regard to some of the issues you mentioned. I just know that I love the magnificent overdrive character this tube has to offer. I listened to variety of EF86 tubes while developing the British Dream. I chose the JJ Electronics EF86 due to its musical



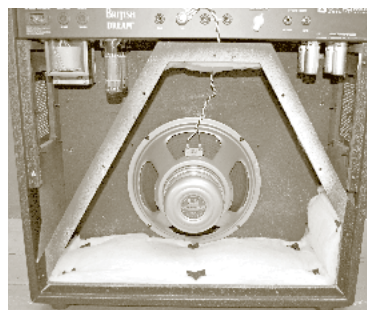
transition from clean to compressed-clean to compressed-grit to balls-out grind. We solved the noise issues by physically shock-mounting

the tube, electronically shielding it and developing a proprietary downstream noise-reduction circuit. As a result, I was able to get the character I wanted out of the EF86 without being hampered by a bunch of noise.

TQR: What influenced your decision to avoid using a tube rectifier?

For starters, I didn't want to compromise my operating voltages in the various circuits and have them dependant of the vagaries of one more vacuum tube. Another thing I'm focusing on is the time-constant associated with sag or compression, which comes from my recording studio experience. Perhaps it's a control thing, but I personally prefer the time-constant of compression to remain consistent no matter what guitar I'm playing, how hard I'm playing or where I'm playing on the neck.

TQR: We noted a Celestion Alnico Gold speaker in our review amp. Can you describe your evaluation process in determining the specific speakers you use and the procedure for breaking them in before each combo amp ships?



During the design process I take a listen to a number of speakers from various manufacturers. I narrow the field down to about three choices and then do another round of listening tests, this time with other

players. So far, we've been judging the speakers we choose based on the tone, feel and the "honesty" of the speaker. What I mean by that is, with the Dream Series amplifiers, we are aiming to deliver a familiar tone and feel that is both authentic and yet refined in our signature "fader up" sort of way. If a particular speaker is putting too much hype on the tone then we went a different direction for these amplifiers. There are a lot of good speakers out there, but only a few delivered the overall performance that we wanted for the Dream Series. In particular, the Alnico Gold by Celestion was simply brilliant for both the British and the American Dream. The other speakers we offer with the Dreams are our own signature British 75 and the American 65. These speakers are made for

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us by WGS out of Kentucky and feature ceramic magnets. The British 75 does a great job at emulating a vintage 25W greenback speaker but with the headroom and power-handling needed for a 112 workhorse. With its seamed-paper cone and lack of doping, the American 65 does an outstanding job of delivering mid-60's tone without a bunch of frills.

The burn-in process starts by playing guitar through the amp and speaker and getting a feel for its temperament. Some speakers are simply ready-to-go as soon as you turn the amp on. Some speakers suffer varying degrees of ghost-notes or "cone cry." This is something that we go out of our way to cure before we ship an amp. In some instances, cone-cry can sound good and contribute positively to the overall tonal experience. If the speaker has a touch of cone-cry that is harmonically pleasing then I'll leave it. On the other hand, if it sounds like a kazoo on the 10th fret of your high "E" string then we'll address it. The treatment process includes running a sequence of test tones through the speaker and mapping out the trouble spots. Then we do a timed burn-in process by feeding it a low frequency signal to get the cone moving. From there, we'll run



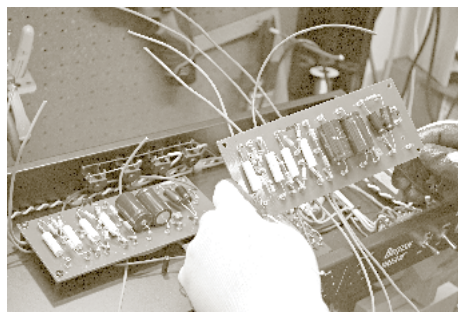
through the test tones again and confirm that we've improved the performance. We'll repeat the process as necessary before we ship it out. It can take some time but it's really worth it. The alternative is to tell the customer to play through it for a few

months until it goes away. That's not the type of customer experience we want associated with 3rd Power.

TQR: Can you describe the significant features that define the sound of the other 3rd Power models you build in addition to the British Dream?

The American Dream is a 6L6-based two-channel amplifier that is inspired by the signature mid-forward sound of a '62 Brownface deluxe and scooped-mid sound of a '65 Blackface deluxe. Although you can't see it, the American Dream features great sounding tube-driven summing bus that mixes the two channels together prior to sharing the phase-inverter and output section. Also featuring HybridMASTER, the American Dream is available as a 112 combo and as a head and extension cab setup. Speaker wise, we make SwitchBACK 112, 212 and 312 cabinets and the HLH 312 Tri-cab – all featuring triangular speaker chambers. Our approach to speaker cabinets is to eliminate the problems associated with early reflections occurring inside the box. It's like having a live-end/dead-end recording studio control room for your guitar speak-

ers, complete with bass traps. Guys like Paul Ebersold and Justin Neibank are relying heavily on our amps and speakers cabinets when tracking records.



The HD100 is a plexi-inspired EL34 or optional 6L6 based mid-to-high-gain amplifier capable of delivering a

wide palette of sounds from its single-channel 12AX7 preamp topology. It also features proprietary tone-stack circuitry that allows you to switch between vintage and modern voicings. An insert FX loop, master volume, and custom-voiced slave output round out the features. The HD100 is the best choice for players who want massive classic rock to modern rock guitar tones at any volume without compromise.

TQR: What are the most significant challenges facing independent builders today, and what do you wish to accomplish in the future? (new models, etc.)

Survival is the biggest challenge. Over the past ten years or so, a huge number of guys have gotten into amp building making it a congested field. I think 2012 is going to be a challenging year for amp builders and smaller manufacturers. Currently, there are far too many options available for the customer and that makes survival even more difficult. Music retailers have too many lines to support as it is and I believe we'll see them consolidating and dropping lines out of necessity. Where that leaves the individual builder, I don't know. At 3RD Power, we've taken a different approach. We are an emerging music company that is innovating our way to prominence, connecting with our customer and building a strong brand. I foresee us hiring a number of people over the next 12 – 18 months as we continue to grow. **To**

REVIEW

British Dream

Some amplifiers are artfully designed with the intention that they not be mistaken for anything but what they are, even from the far reaches of an arena. Remember Divided by 13? We do, and there was a time when Fred Taccone's amps certainly were among the top boutique amps being held aloft in forums and chat rooms as the quintessential custom-built guitar amplifier. Two Rock also held sway for a decade

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with an ardent following, although their amps were not quite as easy to spot as Divided by 13's trademark cream V tolex swatch. Goodells were white hot for a while, Michael Swart's amps still are, and obviously, Dr. Z's unmistakable logo adorns plenty of stages as well as thousands of private music rooms. Credit Jamie Scott for also having designed a line of amp lifers and speaker cabinets that will never be mistaken for anything else, and these days that alone is a significant accomplishment.

We received a British Dream 1x12 combo for review, although it easily could have been an American Dream – both are designed with 3rd Power's triangular Switchback speaker enclosure. The dual input British Dream features two channels – the '59AC and '68 Plexi powered by dual EL-34 output tubes. The '59AC



utilizes an EF86 preamp tube with a single Volume control, three Brilliance settings, and a variable Top Cut pot that rolls off high end in the style of its namesake. The '68 Plexi channel features Volume, Treble, Mid and Bass controls, and a global Presence control affects both channels.

3rd Power's Hybrid Master control is mounted on the back panel and attenuates volume. At the maximum '10' setting attenuation is completely bypassed, and the Hybrid Master operates on both channels. Power levels of 30 watts (pentode) and 15 watts (triode) can also be selected for both channels via a toggle switch on the front panel that includes a middle Standby mode. The combined effect of the Hybrid Master and full/half power pentode/triode modes is clearly aimed at players seeking an amplifier that can be played loud and proud, or at low volume levels without sacrificing sustain and distortion. We rarely play with high distortion at 'bedroom' volume levels, but the British Dream offers as many ways to achieve the authentic attitude of a cranked amp quietly as any amp we have ever played. New York apartment dwellers, take heart! Our enjoyment of the British Dream was most intense

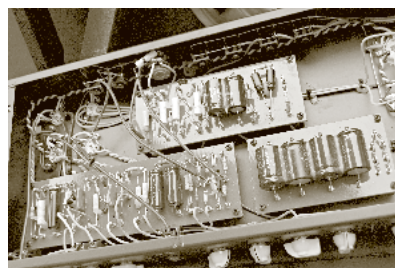


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set at full power, using the Hybrid Master to set the desired volume of the amp. Once you have dialed up the tone and level of distortion needed, cutting the power to 15 watts takes a little more than mere volume out of the mix. The dynamic feel of the amp seemed to be diminished in triode mode, so we preferred to use the Hybrid Master to manage volume in the 30 watt pentode mode. Your results may vary.

Tone



We can happily report that the '59 AC does indeed sound very much like an AC30 when set at full power. The Brilliance settings progressively sharpen top

end while cutting lows and low mids. Top Boost fans will no doubt relish this feature for maximum jangle with single coil pickups and Rickies, but since we have always preferred vintage 'Normal' model AC30s over the 'Bass' and 'Treble' versions as marked on the Vox badge, we really liked the '59AC channel best with the Brilliance control set at 'off,' which produces a big, fat, blustery AC30 tone. The Top Cut control is very useful for dialing in yer tone with single coils and warmer/darker humbuckers. No surprises there.

While a 30 watt Plexi amp clearly never existed, it is nice to render such Marshally tones at 30 watts with the flexibility to further attenuate volume and manage the clean/dirty paradigm. Neither channel in the British Dream is capable of producing sparkling clean tones at stage volume levels with a band, miked or not, but if classic overdriven Marshall tones are what you crave, you've got them at your fingertips, again at volume levels that range from a whisper to a full 30 watts. Tone controls are precise and somewhat interactive, with the global Presence adding snap and sparkle on the top.

The speaker in our review Dream was a Celestion Alnico Gold that we have reviewed in the past. Bright and flush with ample upper mids and second order harmonics, the Gold typically lacks prominent low end, yet the solid wood cabinet seemed



to produce better low frequency response than usual with this speaker. This isn't a matter of one sound being 'better' than another... Less low end can be a good thing with some humbucking pickups that can overwhelm certain speakers

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and amps, and your single coil guitars will thrive on the vivid detail characteristic of the Alnico Gold and the '59 AC channel.

If we were to choose one descriptive word to describe the intention and actual performance of the British Dream it would be 'versatile.' Purists and owners of vintage amps will thrive on the full power voice of the British Dream. At 30 watts, volume is still quite manageable and easy on the ears, but the capabilities of the Hybrid Master and pentode/triode modes in both channels offer a diverse range of volume and distortion levels from an elegantly overbuilt 57 pound combo that is exceptionally useful for stage, studio and home use. **T**

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A Meaner SG Classic

Cheap and Good

With the economy being what it is, we figure you deserve some solid tips on relatively inexpensive yet inspiring guitars and amps from time to time. This is nothing new for us, in fact, our second issue in 1999 titled \$400 of Blues Power featured the exceptional value to be found in what was then a \$400 Fender Made in Japan Stratocaster. They sell for more like \$600 today, about the same price you will pay for the more recent Fender Classic Series Strats and Teles made in Mexico and designed by various Fender masterbuilders. In Fenderland we have also repeatedly urged Stratocaster players to acquire a Mexican Robert Cray Signature model, and



beyond Fender and Gibson we have frequently sung the praises of various Jerry Jones and modern Danelectro guitars. We like inexpensive used G&Ls, too, when they aren't too heavy... And let's not forget Reverend guitars – we like those a lot – always have, and you can add many of the Eastwood guitars to that list as well.

Finding inexpensive models worth owning made by Gibson and Epiphone can be a bit more challenging and confusing. You may recall our review and optimization of an Epiphone Wildkat semi-hollow body guitar in concert with renowned repair expert and TQR advisory board member Dan Erlewine. Dan and his crew did a masterful job of making the Wild Cat as good as it could ever be with a proper re-fret, a new bone nut and a pickup swap. Still, the Epiphone



was never destined to be a truly great guitar. We've had our share of struggles with other Epiphone models, all of which seem to be limited in their potential regardless of how much you may be willing to fuss over them. Our favorite inexpensive Gibson models remain the Gibson USA SGs spanning the past ten years or so. We have bought, modified and reviewed several SGs from 2000-2006 with humbucking pickups mounted in the large pickguard found in standard USA models with great success. We routinely replace the

tuners, tailpiece, bridge and pickups, resulting in an exceptional inexpensive guitar that certainly left us questioning the wisdom of spending an additional \$1,000 or more for a used Custom Shop Historic version. Yes, we have bought and reviewed those, too – both the '61 'Les Paul' humbucking model and the SG 'Special' with dual P90s. This time we focused our attention on a 2007 Gibson USA SG Classic model built in Nashville with two P90s...



If you're interested in pondering the tone of a P90 SG in full bloom, the Who's *Live at Leeds* delivers the goods, and that's what we had in mind as we dissected the 2007 SG we

bought on eBay for \$750.00. The SG was lightly played with zero fret wear, a few insignificant superficial dings, and it came in a cheap gig bag. Playing it unplugged right out of the box, it sounded dead as a post. We had specifically selected this version because unlike the Historic SG and Les Paul models, the standard Gibson SGs feature a rounded C neck shape that is closer to that of a real '59 Les Paul. Remember that. These guitars are also built with a 1-piece mahogany body and neck, although more recent versions now appear to be made with 2 or 3-piece bodies. A reader also informed us that a new SG he bought had a pre-wired circuit board in the control cavity rather than traditional wiring with tone caps and pots. While snapping in a PC board certainly knocks down labor and parts cost, no thank you, Gibson.

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