

A CULT ABOVE

50 WATTS OF STRAIGHT-UP CLASSIC ROCK POWER IS WHAT'S ON THE MENU FROM NEW BOYS WKZ. **MICK TAYLOR** ORDERS THE MAIN COURSE

GBINFO



WKZ LITTLE DEVIL

PRICE: £1,499
BUILT IN: UK
TYPE: All-valve head
POWER: 50 watts
VALVES: 4 x ECC83, 2 x EL34

FEATURES: Single channel with footswitchable boost and master volumes, series effects loop, rotary impedance selector

FOOTSWITCH: WKZ two-button unit included

DIMENSIONS: 695 (w) x 265 (h) x 215 (d) mm

WEIGHT: 16.5kg (36.4lbs)

WKZ 4X12 CABINET

PRICE: £699
POWER HANDLING: 240 watts mono

SPEAKERS: 4 x 12-inch Celestion Vintage 30

FEATURES: 2 x 8-ohm speaker jacks

DIMENSIONS: 715 (w) x 720 (h) x 355 (d) mm

WEIGHT: 37.5kg (82.6lbs)

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Heaven knows it's no easy job to enter the musical instrument market at present. The established British and American brand names have the high-end sewn up, while the phenomenal quality/cost ratio offered by Far Eastern production makes the low-end a no-go area for small start-ups. Nevertheless, there are countless guitar players who are always looking for that bit more; that little tweak here and there that will help take them another step towards the 'perfect' tone.

One man who knows this all too well as a guitarist and amp builder is Martin Wisbey, boss of new brand WKZ amps. We met Martin and heard his amps first at this year's London Guitar Show, on the end of cable to one Geoff Whitehorn, who tried one out on the Live Stage. We were suitably impressed enough to find out more. Hand wiring, UK construction, low-volume production and subsequent professional pricing is where WKZ begins, and if this straight-up 50-watt half-stack is anything to go by, who knows where that will lead? One thing's for sure, though: if you like your rock classic and are currently struggling to find an amp for the job, you really need to know about WKZ.

PRE & POWER AMP

The Little Devil has a single-channel preamp, followed by a simple 50-watt power stage at its heart. Martin Wisbey is open about his first inspiration for the amp, and that's Marshall's well renowned Master Volume amps of the 1970s. To add versatility, you also get an extra footswitchable gain stage, plus a second master volume pot. Inside are custom-wound transformers, and the whole thing is 100 per cent hand-wired throughout.

The front panel couldn't be much simpler, with a gain pot next to the input, that spans a relatively clean response, up to a crunchy rock rhythm with either single coils or humbuckers. This control is ever so slightly noisy at one point of its travel, something Martin assures us will not be a feature of production amps: this is a final-spec prototype with well-used components.

In classic Marshall tradition, the three-band tone circuit – bass, middle and treble – comes after the gain stage, meaning it's not as powerful or fundamental in the tone-shaping process as it would be on the likes of a Fender or Mesa Boogie-style amp. That said, there's a sensible range of adjustment, with enough scope to roll off bass and get rid of mud, and boost trebles for cut and edge if you need it. The mid control ranges from a relatively metal-happy scoop, to a more vocal, mid-heavy tone that's great for throaty, penetrating solos.

After that, you have the option of a footswitchable gain boost, which kicks in another gain stage adding a dollop of drive and volume; it's perfect for a solo boost as you'd expect and if, for any reason, you don't have the footswitch plugged in, it's still available simply by turning the boost knob up. If you don't want any extra boost, leave the pot at zero.

Just as useful are the footswitchable dual master volumes, a feature cropping up on more and more amps these days. The theory is simple in that you can set one louder and one quieter to suit your requirements. The potential uses are myriad, from the obvious 'quiet for vocals while maintaining drive' option, through to compensating for weak effects, two different guitars or, of course, just having that extra animal volume boost when the other bloke in the band is getting too big for his boots.

Around the back, you have the option of a series effects loop which



MEET MART

THE MAN BEHIND WKZ

■ Martin Wisbey is the guitarist-turned-amp-builder responsible for WKZ Amplifiers. We caught up with him to ask a question or two...

How did you get into building amps, Martin?

"I was playing in a band with a chap who used old amps. They were always in need of servicing and repair, so we'd go and see this electronics bloke. He would bore us to tears talking about circuits, so we learned to test and replace things ourselves. Then we started hot rodding, doing master volume conversions; basic things, just read from books. Over the years, you end up accumulating knowledge and know-how. A few years ago I teamed up with a genius who was working in a local electronics company who had cut his teeth on valve amps, but was bored of the test equipment he was making. So we decided to go to the next level."

What is the main inspiration behind the Little Devil?

"We've all played in pubs with other guitar players, and when it's time to do a solo, no one can hear you over the noise of the other guy. So independent master volumes are a must. The gain boost is also important because if you use a pedal, line driver or overdrive, the sound always becomes thinner when you switch it on. I didn't want



that; I wanted the tone to remain unaltered, but with more gain. I wanted both features on one amp, with just a simple footswitch. Too many amps have too many functions – you need to be able to plug and play."

How do customers go about trying/buying an amp?

"We are currently in talks with certain high-end dealers around the country, and as we appoint them, we will release their details on our website. People can also contact me directly and come down and try one."

What's next in the WKZ pipeline?

"Earlier in the year, Geoff (Whitehorn) said that a 1x12 combo, just like the head, would be great. The British are a combo-loving nation; Bernie Marsden also said the same. Then maybe a lower-powered EL84 amp... (The Little, Little Devil!). We'll see!"

operates at one level. Standard time-based and modulation stompboxes work fine in this setting, though committed tweekers will find the lack of mix or level pots a little limiting. More importantly though, having the loop there in the first place doesn't seem to spoil the core tone as it does in many other amps: the Little Devil sounds nothing short of stonking.

A quick look inside confirms WKZ's 'hand-wired' claims. Chassis-mounted tube sockets, pots and custom-wound transformers – of which WKZ makes much – are hard wired, via a small tag board in the centre of the steel chassis. This approach is fundamental to the Little Devil's whole raison d'être, and while we're probably past



■ All up the classic 50-watt half-stack. Good job WKZ



■ A simple series effects loop and an impedance selector make up the back panel features

"A RANGE OF CLEAN TO DIRTY SOUNDS, LOUD THEN LOUDER"

arguing whether PCBs are 'worse' than point-to-point hard wiring, there's no doubt that the latter has a clarity of tone and musicality that's hard to dispute... when it's done right of course.

Outside again, the pots, chicken-head knobs and toggle switches are high quality and well-secured to the steel chassis, but they're still ever so slightly vulnerable to unnecessary knocks if you're lugging the head without a flightcase. Recessing the control plate just 5mm or 10mm further would solve the worry. White screen-printed markings on the black front panel make for maximum legibility and finally, a dark blue jewel light – for some reason it feels so much more upmarket than red!

CABINETS & SPEAKERS

Like many quality amp manufacturers, WKZ uses high quality ply for its cabinets; it's known to resonate more sympathetically with electric guitars than particle board, and its strength/longevity characteristics are time-proven. The WKZ 4x12 breaks little new ground in design, instead plumping for the classic angled format with rear-mounted speakers in the baffle. Tough, textured vinyl, recessed handles and black corner protectors take care of the practicalities, while there are two 8-ohm jack connections on the rear for hooking it up. The only

improvement would be to recess the jack socket plate, perhaps, as it's possible to catch it on something if you're in a hurry up a fire escape, or into the back of the Transit.

Inside the cab you'll find a quartet of Celestion's much-loved Vintage 30s. Used by countless manufacturers in high-end rock amps, it's a 60-watt, 100dB driver that seems to suit strong mids and fat low end particularly well, without too much break-up as you push the volume, all of which earns its reputation as having a good mix of vintage and modern attributes.

The whole thing is put together very competently, and does everything it says on the metaphorical tin: a good ol' classic 4x12.

SOUNDS

The way this amp is configured seems like the most obvious thing in the world, once it's presented to you on a WKZ-shaped plate. That's to say that what most rock guitarists want, is a range of clean to dirty sounds, first loud, then louder. And that is exactly what the Little Devil brings, with one small caveat in that you must be prepared to use your guitar's volume pot for drive and texture.

With the gain and EQ set to middle, masters at 10 o'clock and the guitar's volume pot half-cock, there's that visceral, direct nature to the power delivery that you'd associate with a straight-up EL34-powered head, with a fast attack and a big thump in the mid range for cleaner tones. The fundamental tone of the guitar

DETAILS

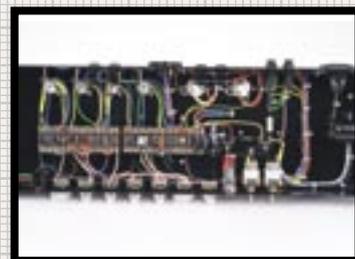
A SUPERB DEBUT FROM A NEW NAME IN BRITISH HAND-BUILT AMPS



■ The included footswitch plugs into the front panel minimising hassle when setting up



■ Gain boost and a second master level. So simple, it's brilliant



■ Hand wiring throughout with a simple tag board. 'Easy' repairs, and it sounds great



GBCONCLUSION

SIMPLE TO USE, GREAT SOUNDING AND VERSATILE. DON'T PASS THIS BY

■ It's hard to know whether to laugh or cry when reviewing an amp like this. There's little or nothing in terms of innovation – hand wiring valve amps is a backward step, in fact – but at GB we're unanimous in one thing: the WKZ Little Devil sounds simply fab.

If you hanker after a classic rock '70s Marshall-type tone, but with a more open response, dynamics and sensitivity, you're going to love this. WKZ has succeeded in building a brilliant sounding rocker, and a versatile one at that, despite the blissfully straightforward control panel and feature set. Clean/breakup, distortion, loud, louder: simple.

Price is going to be an issue in these early days for WKZ because while there's no denying the brilliant tone and high quality British, hand-wired status, convincing punters to shell out over some of the big-name competition is no easy job. On the strength of this amp's tone though, we'd strongly urge you to plug in to the Little Devil and turn it up. You won't be disappointed. **GB**

GBOPINION

WKZ LITTLE DEVIL & 4x12 CABINET

GOLD STARS

- ★ Brilliant open, expressive rock tone
- ★ Versatile...
- ★ ...yet so easy to use

BLACK MARKS

- Knobs potentially vulnerable

IDEAL FOR...

Classic rock fans wanting an open, articulate tone with excellent dynamics and buckets of volume

rings through strongly and musically with a sensible EQ range to fatten, sharpen and focus. Roll the guitar's volume up, and the level and harmonics come in abundance for a super rock rhythm tone that retains plenty of sparkle and definition, especially with single coils. Humbuckers have extra thickness of course, pushing the preamp that bit harder for more gain, straight into Angus Young territory. Roll back the volume again, and it all cleans up nicely for chording. In fact with the master running higher, and the guitar's volume set low, the Little Devil is capable of some chiming clean tones, if always that bit squarer and more direct than you'd expect of a 6L6-powered open-back combo.

Kicking in the footswitchable boost offers an extra swathe of gain and takes the Little Devil from its roughly 1970s Marshall Master Volume territory, forward at least a decade with a smoother distortion that'll do metal if you so wish. To us, it sounds better used more judiciously, with plenty of mids dialled in for a bit of classic EVH-style drive. There's no thinning or brittleness with the extra

drive, just more girth to the basic tone. What's more, the Little Devil allows every guitar to retain its intrinsic tone to an impressive degree.

You can then opt to footswitch to the second master, set higher of course, for that all important push 'over the edge' as Nigel Tufnel would say, and start to explore just how loud this amplifier is. With the power amp pumping, its dynamics become an important tone shaper, with more of that squashy, compressed nature you'd associate with a great 50-watt head.

For such an ostensibly simple layout, the Little Devil spans a wide range of classic and modern overdrive and distortion textures, keeping its classic rock power delivery at its heart; it's almost impossible not to like it, as everyone at GB would pay testament.

GBRATINGS

WKZ LITTLE DEVIL & 4X12 CABINET

BUILD QUALITY	★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★☆
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
GBVERDICT	★★★★★