

PRICE
£2,295

VOLT AMP CO OVER-DRIVE SUPER RR

Inspired by the legendary Dumble Overdrive Special, this valve head is hand-wired in the UK. David Greeves gets a jolt from Volt

Few amps have quite as much mythology around them as those built by Howard Dumble. This is partly down to their scarcity – fewer than 300 were ever made – but these amps also have a stellar reputation for not only supreme tone but also total reliability, and they have been associated with a whole host of legendary players, such as Larry Carlton, Robben Ford, Eric Johnson and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

There are quite a few companies currently building Dumble inspired amps, mostly based on the Overdrive Special (ODS) model, with US outfits like Fuchs and Two-Rock leading the field. Now a British amp builder is getting in on the action with this hand-wired valve head, the Over-drive Super RR. Making no secret of its origins, this amp even claims to improve on some of the other 'D'-type amps on the market. It's a big task, but we'll be delighted if this head can deliver as promised.

Pre & Power Amp

Part of the mystique of Dumble amps – and also part of the problem when it comes to building a production amp that can claim to offer 'that sound' – is that these amps were all built by one man, with each extensively tweaked and tuned, and individual amps even tailored to suit the player who ordered the amp, the guitar they used and the sound they wanted. No two were the same, but it's generally agreed that they all sound great.

It's immediately encouraging, then, to learn that this amp is hand-built by one man – Geoff Pugh of Aston Electronics – using eyelet boards, high-quality components and not a printed circuit board in sight. The Over-drive Super RR was developed in collaboration with Rob Rolph – hence the 'RR' in the name – the guitarist with top Steely Dan tribute act Nearly Dan (see box on page 62), who should know a fine Dumble-type tone when he hears one.

To understand how this amp works, let's look at the signal path from start to finish. High- and low-gain inputs are followed by a preamp section comprising volume, treble, middle and bass controls, plus three switches. The deep switch is used to shift the overall tonality towards the low end. Similarly, the mid boost switch does what it suggests,

ITS ENCOURAGING
TO LEARN THAT THIS
AMP IS ENTIRELY
HAND-BUILT BY
JUST ONE MAN

going up the mid range to thicken the tone or add punch to a solo or lead line.

The final 'rock/jazz' switch does rather more, altering the amount of gain available and the way the EQ controls operate. The 'jazz' setting is designed to give a smoother, more neutral tone, while 'rock' adds lots more gain and makes the cut and boost of the EQ more aggressive. What you can't see from the outside is that the amp also incorporates a

switchable preamp boost, which takes the EQ out of the signal path and adds a preset level boost, determined by a pot on the underside of the chassis.

Next comes the overdrive section, with knobs for drive and level. It's important to understand that, as with most other amps in the style of the Dumble ODS, turning on this section is not equivalent to switching to a separate channel. Rather this is an additional stage of amplification switched into the signal path straight after the preamp, so the preamp volume and EQ controls are still in play.

The amp's valve-driven spring reverb and effects loop circuits follow and, as with much of this amp, the effects loop has been designed to be as practical as possible in a professional gigging context, with level controls for both the send and return. These



The amp is entirely hand-wired



The preamp's deep, mid boost and rock/jazz switches help tailor your tone



VOLT AMP CO OVER-DRIVE SUPER RR

Price: £2,295

Built in: UK

Type: Valve head

Power: 100/50 watts

Valves: 4 x 6L6, 5 x 12AX7

Features: High & low inputs, preamp volume, treble, middle & bass controls, deep, mid boost & rock/jazz switches, overdrive drive & level controls, power amp master level & presence controls, footswitchable preamp boost with internal level trimpot, valve-driven reverb with level control, valve-driven effects loop with send & return level controls, in/out & -10dB pad switches, overdrive & preamp boost on/off switches, footswitch input, full/half power & internal cooling fan on/off switches, 2 x speaker outputs (4/8/16 ohms)

Footswitch: 3-button footswitch included (overdrive, preamp boost & mid boost on/off)

Dimensions: 260(h) x 528(w) x 258(d) mm

Weight: 18kg (40lb)

CONTACT DETAILS

Aston Electronics

Tel: 01785812071

www.astonelectronics.co.uk

GB VERDICT

GOLD STARS

- ★ Superb tones
- ★ Very high standard of build
- ★ Loads of pro features

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Discerning players looking for a top-class amp in the Dumble style

GB RATING



offer unity gain in the centre (12 o'clock) position and, together with a -10dB pad, provide huge scope to cut or boost the level in order to interface with all manner of gear and get the gain structure right. Last of all are the master volume and presence controls.

The effects loop can be switched



Four 6L6s supply 100 watts of power

out of the circuit, which also turns off the reverb. It has its own level control on the rear panel, which is a very busy bit of real estate indeed. Besides the effects loop controls, dual speaker outs (switchable to 4, 8 or 16 ohms), there are switches for full/half power (100 or 50 watts), the internal cooling fan, and the overdrive and preamp boost functions. These can also be switched on and off from the included three-button footswitch, along with the mid boost function, though the latter can be substituted for reverb on/off if you prefer.

In terms of construction, this amp is very impressive indeed, from the neatly covered cabinet down to the internal soldering. Looking in at the rear, you'll see a couple of absolutely massive transformers – crucial to the sound of the amp, but contributing the bulk of this head's 18kg weight – and the complement of valves: five 12AX7s (preamp, phase inverter, reverb and effects loop) and four 6L6s (power amp).

Sounds

Pinning down 'the Dumble sound' is tricky, but what we'd look for in an amp that claimed to offer it is a 'Fender-on-steroids' clean sound, overdriven tones that are rich, musical and highly controllable, great dynamics and a wide frequency response... and that pretty much sums up what you get from the Over-drive Super RR!

From the first, this amp has that grin-inducing 'X' factor that just instinctively feels right. This is partly a matter of the deep, full bass end, partly the bright yet smooth top end and clear mid range, but mainly it's the responsive dynamics, which make the amp feel like an organic extension of the guitar itself. This is a wonderfully big, musical sound and every nuance of your playing (including every little mistake) is delivered with a sharper focus.

There's a fair number of controls to get to grips with, but with a little experimentation you can tailor this head to not only deliver your



The master volume is sensibly placed after the reverb and effects loop

desired tones but also suit the particular guitar and speaker cab you're using. Heavy metal is not really on the agenda, but otherwise this amp proves incredibly capable, covering jazz, blues, pop and rock styles with consummate ease.

Even at the lower 50-watt setting, this is a powerful amp that's really designed for professional gigging. However, its design means that it doesn't need to be running flat-out to sound great – we found we could get the full range of superb clean and driven tones with master volume as low as 3 on the dial. Still, this is clearly not a bedroom amp!

Conclusion

Geoff Pugh is keen to stress that he sees this head as a musical instrument in its own right. On the evidence of our own ears, we'd have to agree. The price is considerable, though it in fact compares favourably to similar boutique imports from the US.

FUTURE OWNERS
OF THIS AMP ARE
GUARANTEED ONE
THING: GREAT
TONE FOR LIFE

It's also worth remembering that here you're paying for an amp that has been hand-built by one skilled craftsman – what would you expect to pay for a fine, custom-made guitar? The price means that this amp is really for those who take their tone seriously, and the range of features and 50/100-watt power rating naturally suggest professional use. Whoever they are, however, future owners of this amp are guaranteed one thing: great tone for life. **GB**



The fully-featured, valve-driven effects loop has everything you could need

MEET ROB ROLPH...

The Nearly Dan guitarist explains his part in the development of the Over-drive Super RR

How did you get involved with Volt Amps?

"Geoff [Pugh, of Aston Electronics] is pretty well known in the local area. I met him about three years ago at a gig I was playing. We got chatting and it became immediately obvious that valve amp building was a passion for him. Leaping on the opportunity, I brought up the idea of building a Dumble-type amp that I could use in my Steely Dan tribute band, Nearly Dan. Geoff was up for it straight away and we set out on an 18-month collaborative venture – he was the technician, I was the player – which resulted in the amp you see here.

"Truth is, I couldn't afford the \$40,000 price tag of the real thing – who can? – and what of the other options? OK, there are several 'D'-type clones being built, mainly in the US and very expensive. Admittedly most of them are incredible amps, but so is this. I really wanted an amp built here in the UK, with the exact features that I was looking for."

And what were you looking for in this amp?

"I wanted the amp to be really player-friendly for live gigs. For instance, most Dumble ODS amps require an extra, even rarer rack device called a 'Dumbleator' to interface with external effects. So I had Geoff build in a valve-driven effects loop. But I wanted it to be good in the studio too, so that loop needed to be switched completely out of the circuit when required. That feature is very useful when matching up your effects units – you can easily switch between wet and dry to get the level just so.

"Secondly, most Dumbles didn't have a reverb, so Geoff put in a nicely tweaked valve-driven reverb. I also wanted an extra mid boost function, not usually seen in Dumbles. This is to allow single-coil guitars some extra girth, if needed. We also fitted a switchable fan to keep everything cool.

"Lastly, I noticed that in many 'D'-type amps the master volume pot is positioned before the effects loop, so that turning up your master mid-gig can clip your



effects' input as a nasty side effect. I didn't want that, so we moved the master volume to after the loop, so you can turn the master volume up wherever you like during your gig."

What is it about 'the Dumble sound' that does it for you and so many players?

"There's a few specific things about the Dumble tone, in my humble opinion. For one, how dynamically it responds to your input on the guitar, and how expressive that can make your soloing. Secondly, in terms of tone, it's how solid the low frequencies are and how sweet the high end sings. But then critically, for me, it's the 'chewy' lower mid range on your E, A and D strings when overdriven that no other amp seems to do."

How do you think the Over-drive Super RR compares to the original Dumble amps?

"To be fair to Dumble, it's widely acknowledged that virtually none of his amazing amps are exactly the same – they're all tweaked in some way. So if you want to know if the Overdrive Super RR is 'exactly' like a Dumble, the question is, which one? We have tried to use as many of the same brand components as we could get hold of, with very robust transformers and power supplies, plus Geoff has been fastidious with the details on his solder work and wiring layout. So what I would say is, I've been listening to the tone of those amps for many years and, to my ears, this amp has uncannily similar characteristics in tone, delivery and dynamic response."

• For the latest information on Nearly Dan, you can head to www.nearlydan.co.uk