

TONE TARDIS

GB INFO



CORNELL PLEXI 7

PRICE: £645

BUILT IN: UK

TYPE: All-valve 1x10
comboPOWER: 7 watts, switches
to 1 watt, 0.25 wattsVALVES: 2 x 12AX7,
1 x EL84FEATURES: Volume, tone &
edge controls, power
A/B/C switchSPEAKERS: 1 x 10-inch
Celestion G10 VintageDIMENSIONS: 380(h) x
420(w) x 200(d) mm

WEIGHT: 12kg (26.5lbs)

CORNELL
ROMANY PLUS

PRICE: £865

BUILT IN: UK

TYPE: All-valve 1x12
comboPOWER: 10 watts,
switches to 2 watts,
0.25 wattsVALVES: 2 x 12AX7,
1 x 12AT7, 1 x 6L6GTFEATURES: Volume, bass,
treble & reverb controls,
power A/B/C & EQ cut
switchesSPEAKERS: 1 x 12-inch
Jensen CH1270DIMENSIONS: 380(h) x
540(w) x 255(d) mm

WEIGHT: 16.5kg (36.5lbs)

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THEY MIGHT BE SMALL ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT DON'T LET THAT FOOL YOU. **DAVID GREEVES** PUTS A PAIR OF HAND-WIRED BRITISH TONE MACHINES UNDER THE GUITAR BUYER MICROSCOPE

“Small is tremendous,” sings Zoë Lewis on the T.K. Maxx advert that seems to be constantly on our telly at the moment, and there are plenty of guitarists who would agree. In the last few years, more and more of us have been discovering the considerable joys of lower-powered valve amps that put tone before volume and, more importantly, let you enjoy cranked-up valve distortion at practical levels.

For those not already in the know, Dennis Cornell is a bit of legend on the UK amp scene to say the least. Having started out designing and building Sound City amps and Fuzz Face pedals for the Arbiter company in the '60s, he's worked under Tom Jennings at Vox and for Fender, first repairing amps, then as a consultant, before setting up his own company, DC Developments. Based in Southend-on-Sea, the company that started out doing custom builds and modifications now produces a range of amps, including the AC30-esque Journeyman, the Marshall-inspired Plexi 18/20 and 45/50, and the Fender-y Cornell Custom “Eric Amp”, which was developed for none other than old Slowhand himself.

CONSTRUCTION & FEATURES – ROMANY PLUS

While the Plexi 7 (which we'll come to in good time) is completely new, the Romany Plus has been around in one form or another for some time. Originally designed as a self-build project, the amp that grew into the Cornell Romany was loosely based on the iconic Fender Champ. The original Romany was a 10-watt single-ended Class-A amp with a 10-inch speaker, simple volume, bass and treble controls and an EQ cut switch, which removes the tone stack from the signal path. The design has refined and augmented over the years to incorporate a 2-watt mode and a 'Plus' model, featuring a 12-inch speaker and built-in spring reverb. The latest generation of Romanys includes a third power setting, switching down to a minuscule 0.25 watts. This is achieved by a three-way rotary switch marked 'A', 'B' and 'C' for 10, 2 and 0.25 watts respectively.

So there you have it – a refreshingly simple amp with few controls to worry about. It's compact and fairly light too, and looks absolutely fantastic with its very neatly finished traditional tweed covering. Cornell buys his tweed from the same supplier as Fender. It's

LESS IS MORE

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT LOW-POWERED VALVE AMPS?

■ You might be wondering how having less power could ever be considered an advantage for a guitar amp.

One of the main reasons is that, to get the overdrive sound that many of us crave, you need a valve amp and you need to turn it up until you start generating distortion in the power amp. With 10 watts or less on tap, you can hit this sweet spot without having to endure ear-bashing sound levels. While overdrive in the preamp stage of the amp is an

important component of many classic overdrive sounds, preamp distortion on its own can be harsh and fizzy. The power amp is where much of the valve magic happens – harmonically rich overdrive and natural-sounding compression. Though the ideal might still be a Fender Bassman or a 50-watt Marshall 'Plexi' head turned up as far as it will go, these amps are far more practical for players who want to be able to practice and record at home without sacrificing good tone.



then stained with a special brown concoction to give a suitably aged look, attached to the marine ply cabinet and varnished. As with everything else on these amps, the work is done by hand, by Dennis Cornell himself or one of his small workforce. Even the individual screw brackets, he tells us, are pressed from sheet brass in-house, and the leather handles are hand-cut by a local saddler. For many of us, it's details like this that make the idea of owning



■ The output switch on the Romany Plus turns the power from 10 to 2 to 0.25 watts

"WE DEFY ANY OF YOU NOT TO FALL INSTANTLY IN LOVE WITH THIS AMP'S BRIGHT-BUT-BALANCED TONE"

a hand-built 'boutique' amp so much more appealing when compared to something that was made on a giant production line.

Removing the back panel reveals the amp's relatively simple circuitry, neatly hand-wired in traditional fashion. The amp uses three valves in the preamp – two 12AX7s and one 12AT7 – and a single 6L6GT in the power amp. Since this is a single-ended Class-A amp, you can substitute this 6L6 for anything that'll fit the same valve base. But, as Dennis Cornell points out, the amp has been designed to produce a classic, glassy Fender-style sound, and the best valve for the job in the 6L6. We're inclined to take his word for it!

For the same reason, the Romany Plus has a Jensen CH1270 speaker. Jensens featured in just about all the classic Fender amps, and, having auditioned all of the current range, Cornell plumped for the ceramic-magnet CH1270 as the best choice for sound and cost. Since these amps are all made to order, you can specify any speaker you like, but this one is recommended for the most authentic vintage Fender tone.

SOUNDS – ROMANY PLUS

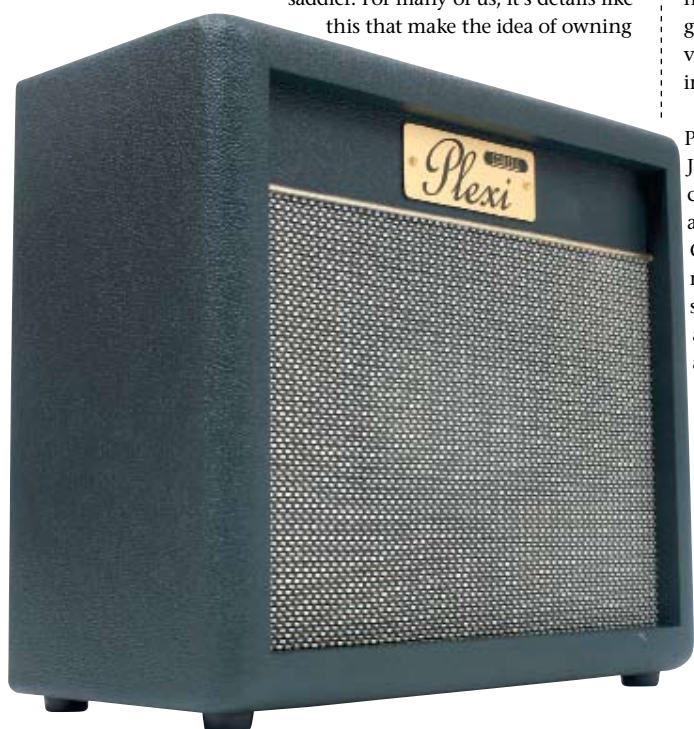
And what a tone it is! We defy any of you to plug a Strat or Tele into the Romany Plus, set the volume and tone controls to 12 o'clock and not

fall instantly in love with this amp's bright-but-balanced, dynamically responsive and oh-so-Fender-y tone. At full power (10 watts), the sound is still clean, though high-output pickups will drive the amp into distortion much earlier. The amp exhibits the lovely rich bass and glassy treble that we associated with '50s Fender Bassmans and other 'tweed-era' amps.

Turn the volume knob up further and the Romany Plus begins to overdrive and distort, and while there's a rough and rowdy edge to the sound, there's none of the fizzy distortion that you'll encounter on some 6V6-powered small Fender-style amps. Instead, it's that wonderful combination of warmth and grit that is, again, very tweed-y.

Best of all, if you're using a guitar with appropriately vintage-style, low-output pickups, you can whack the volume up on the amp and go from a fat, more-or-less clean sound to full-on rock drive using just the strength of your pick attack – the Romany Plus really is that sensitive and dynamically responsive.

Flick the EQ cut switch and you get an extra kick of volume and distortion and an altogether more raw and aggressive tone that's a complete contrast to the more balanced, smooth sound you get with the tone stack switched in. There's less bass, with most of the energy focussed on the





■ The Plexi 7's output switch cuts the power from 7 to 1 to 0.25 watts



■ The Romany Plus has a Jensen CH1270 for authentic vintage Fender-style tones

mid-range, and the distortion is more heavily saturated and in-your-face.

Switching down to 2 watts means that the amp begins to overdrive sooner, and also lowers the overall output volume – turned all the way up at 10 watts, the Romany Plus is too loud for polite home practising; miked-up, you could definitely use it at smaller gigs. At 0.25 watts, the amp is really quiet, and there's practically no clean headroom. We'd always prefer to use it at full power if we could, but these lower power settings are really useful at home. The Romany Plus would also be brilliant for studio recording. Besides sounding fantastic, it's incredibly quiet – until you play a note you can barely tell that it's switched on.

CONSTRUCTION & FEATURES – PLEXI 7

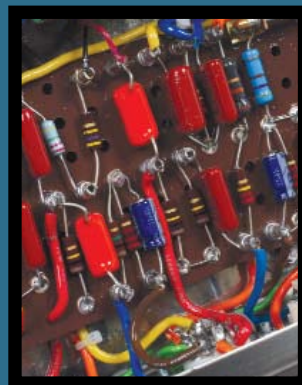
Like Cornell's other Plexi models, the new Plexi 7 draws inspiration from Marshall's mid- to late-'60s 'Plexi' amp heads (so called because of their gold Plexiglass control panels). We thought the Romany Plus was small, but the Plexi 7 is positively tiny. It's also one of the cutest little amps you're ever likely to see – we've had to stop a number of love-struck visitors to the GB offices

HAND STAND

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT HAND-WIRED AMPS?

■ **As any guitar bore will tell you, hand-wired amps sound better than amps that use PCBs (printed circuit boards). But do they really? And if so, why?**

The traditional way of making an amp is to wire all the individual components together by hand – all the revered vintage Fender, Marshall and Vox amps of the '50s and '60s were made this way. This is a relatively slow and therefore expensive process. Conversely, using PCBs is, generally speaking, much faster and cheaper, so PCB construction often goes hand-in-hand with other cost-saving shortcuts, which can lead to a below-par end result. Why take the time to do things like carefully test and select components if your main objective is keeping costs down? So the primary reason why PCBs get a bad rap is that they're associated



with cheap products, but who expects cheap products to sound as good as expensive ones?

One technical advantage of hand-wiring is that, if it's done properly, you can minimise the amount of crosstalk and interference between wires and

components within the amp, which can create noise and sap tone. This is much more difficult to achieve with a PCB, though not impossible. Another advantage of hand-wired designs is that they are generally very easy to service and repair – you can replace faulty components in a 50-year-old Fender amp with relative ease, while repairing a modern PCB fault is very difficult and sometimes impossible.

But it's not as simple as "hand-wired good, PCB bad". It's perfectly possible to build a bad hand-wired amp or a good PCB amp, and many well-respected builders, including Mesa Boogie and Fuchs, use PCBs in some parts of their amps. There are lots of more affordable PCB-based amps that produce great results too, but the fact remains that many top builders choose to hand-wire their amps.

"STICK A MICROPHONE IN FRONT OF THIS LITTLE BEAUTY AND THE RESULTS WILL NOT DISAPPOINT"

from slipping it under their overcoat and wandering off.

The build and finishing on the cabinet are once again outstanding, dark, textured vinyl, gold 'Plexi' control panel and Marshall-style knobs and handle all put us in mind of the big M's model 1974 combo – if it were 15 inches tall, that is. With no reverb to worry about, the Plexi 7's controls are even simpler than those of the Romany Plus – volume and tone knobs are joined by an edge control (similar in function to the presence control on other amps) and the A/B/C power switch, taking the Plexi 7 from 7 watts down to 1 and 0.25 watts. The combo is fitted with a 10-inch Celestion G10 Vintage speaker, an obvious choice for a British-flavoured amplifier.

While Cornell's larger Plexi 18/20 and 45/50 use pairs of EL84 and EL34 power amp valves, the single-ended Plexi 7 uses a single EL84, with two 12AX7 valves in the preamp. It also has a solid-state rectifier, while the bigger Cornell Plexi amps use a GZ34 valve.

Perhaps a bit of background would be useful here. In layman's terms, the rectifier is the bit of the amp that takes the AC mains and converts it to DC in order to power the rest of the circuit. The characteristic 'sag' experienced with a valve rectifier occurs when the valve can't quite keep up with the demands of the amp – when it's already working hard and you hit a sudden loud note, for example. Some guitarists love the playing dynamics of valve-rectified amps, while others prefer the more snappy response of a silicon-diode rectifier.

Dennis Cornell explains that, while the vintage Fender and Marshall amps that inspire these two amps used valve rectifiers (like all amps back then), there was no point including a rectifier valve on either the Plexi 7 or the Romany Plus as it would make little difference to the sound. This is because they draw so little power →



DETAILS

TWO BEAUTIFUL BOXES OF TOTAL TONE GENIUS



■ With just four controls to worry about, the Plexi 7 is as simple to use as it is satisfying



■ The Romany's EQ Cut switch cuts out the tone stack, giving more volume and distortion



■ Both amps are entirely hand-wired, with the components neatly laid out on tag board



GBOPINION

CORNELL ROMANY PLUS & PLEXI 7

GOLD STARS

- ★ Superb valve sounds at sensible volumes
- ★ Faultless construction standards
- ★ Stunning looks

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Vintage Fender and Marshall fans seeking a high-quality amp for practising and recording

that no rectifier 'sag' would occur. He's absolutely right, of course, and in any case, Marshall began phasing out valve rectifiers in favour of diodes soon after the first 'Plexi' amps appeared, as solid-state rectifiers suited the higher-powered amps that came to define the Marshall sound.

SOUNDS – PLEXI 7

Firing up the Plexi 7, it's immediately obvious that clean sounds are not a priority here – this amp is built for overdrive, and it's only too happy to oblige. With humbuckers, P-90s or Fender-style single-coils, the sound is simply immense, with much more bass than you might expect from such a small package. It's like having a miniature Marshall stack in your living room, and we had great fun running through our entire repertoire of Led Zeppelin and AC/DC riffs.

The tone and edge controls work very well together, allowing you to add some high-frequency bite at lower drive levels or smooth the sound out when the amp is really cooking for a wonderful sustaining lead sound. The range of sounds you can access with

these two simple controls is really impressive, from bristling, edgy distortion to a creamy saturated lead tone. Stick a microphone in front of this little beauty and the recorded results will not disappoint.

As with the Romany Plus, the Plexi 7 at full power has quite a bit of poke. Switching down to 1 watt gives you more drive at lower volumes and limits the overall output to more civilised levels, but whereas it feels like the Romany Plus loses just a little of its magic at lower power settings, the Plexi 7's 1-watt setting is just as satisfying. The 0.25 watt setting is quieter still, but, again, we can't imagine using it all that often – not when the sound at 1 and 7 watts is so absurdly entertaining.

GBRATINGS

CORNELL ROMANY PLUS & PLEXI 7

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

GBCONCLUSION

SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED

■ We've known about Dennis Cornell for some time, and these superb combos simply offer further confirmation of his consummate skill as an amp builder.

The Romany Plus offers some evocative tweed Fender tones, both clean and dirty, with an impressive dynamic response and incredibly low background noise. Both amps are gorgeous to look at, but there's something about the Plexi 7's compact dimensions and retro Marshall good looks that strums particularly vigorously at our heart strings. It sounds fantastic too, with a wonderfully open and natural valve distortion sound that is utterly compelling. These amps are beautifully made and achieve their mission brilliantly, which is to deliver sweet Class-A tone at manageable levels for practising, recording and even small gigs (when suitably miked-up). Moreover, both amps – the Plexi 7 in particular – are very competitively priced considering that they're made by hand in the UK. **GB**