



PHOTOGRAPHY NEIL GODWIN

Cornford RK 100 Richie Kotzen signature 100W head

£1,799

Tone is the name of the game and Richie Kotzen's new Cornford is built from the ground up to deliver 100-watts of it by Benji Bartlett

With the RK 100, Cornford Amplification has managed to pull off quite a unique trick. As you can imagine, it's never easy when dealing with the idiosyncrasies of a signature artist to come up with a product that will both ideally suit the artist's needs and have enough mass appeal to translate into sales. After all, it's hardly worth the bother of producing a signature product if a company is only ever going to sell to the artist himself. With the RK 100 Cornford has not only succeeded in creating a fine-looking head and matching cab, but it has actually managed to come up with something unquestionably simple that should appeal to a wide range of players. You might be surprised to learn that, for a player of Richie Kotzen's versatility, the amplifier features just a single channel. No mess, no fuss, just a 100W single channel amplifier of the purest configuration. Its only concession to modern day design is an attenuation switch, but more about that later.

RK 100

When compared to the control panels of many modern amplifiers the RK 100 looks decidedly sparse. There are no push buttons or switches, no flashing lights or MIDI store buttons. You won't find any voicing switches, reverb controls or indeed anything other than the gain, our ubiquitous triumvirate of passive bass/mid/treble tone controls and a master volume. An overall presence control governs the nearness of your tone, but that's your lot for the front panel.

For all its modern attributes in terms of styling and gain structure, this amplifier certainly harks back to the simpler amp designs of yesteryear. To the left of the brushed stainless steel control panel a single guitar input sits above the jack socket for the footswitch. Richie specified a front-mounted socket to save having to fiddle about round the back of the amplifier when setting up at shows. Above the heavy-duty footswitch button the label reads 'Hot', which makes one naturally



No mess, no fuss, just a 100-watt single channel amplifier of the purest configuration

assume that it is some kind of boost switch. In fact, the opposite is true. Once you've set up a sound to your taste this pedal reduces the output of the first gain stage and has the same effect as rolling back the volume of your guitar a predetermined amount. So you're actually getting a cut, which of course can be viewed as a boost when approached from the other direction.

Geddit? Most valve amp players would agree that the best clean tones are often born of a dirty sound 'cleaned-up' by backing off the volume, and this design supports that thinking.

In terms of nuts and bolts, the RK 100 follows the time-honoured, hand-wired, point-to-point convention of all the truly great guitar amplifiers. Not a printed circuit board in sight, just

CORNFORD RK 100 RICHIE KOTZEN SIGNATURE 100W HEAD £1,799

GUITAR AMPS CD TRACKS 9 & 10

CORNFORD RK 100
PRICE: £1,799
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All valve single-channel head
OUTPUT: 100W RMS
VALVES: Four JJ Tesla ECC83/12AX7 preamp, four JJ Tesla EL34 power amp (also 6L6G compatible)
DIMENSIONS: 260mm (h) x 660mm (w) x 230mm (d)
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 25/55
CABINET: 19mm lock jointed plywood
CHANNELS: One
CONTROLS: Gain, bass, middle, treble, master volume, presence, standby switch, mains switch
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Neutrik locking speaker cable connector
OPTIONS: None at present
RANGE OPTIONS: Cornford Hellcat (£1,699) 35W 2 Channel combo. MK50H (£1,399) 50W, single-channel switchable master volume head. Harlequin (£599) 6W recording amp. Hurricane (£1,199) 20W combo with reverb
SPEAKER ENCLOSURE: RK vintage-style with 4 x 12 Celestion Vintage 30 speakers. £699 each
ACCESSORIES: 3M IEC mains lead, two-foot speaker cable, 20-foot footswitch cable, high quality instrument lead. Instruction manual. RK 100 footswitch
Cornford
01227 280000
www.cornfordamps.com



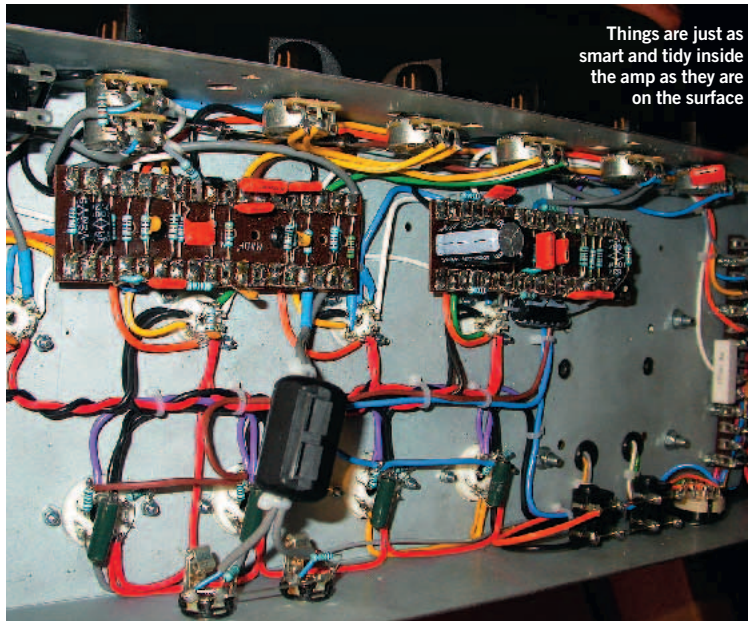
The amp comes with its own RK 100 footswitch

CORNFORD RK 100	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Unbelievably versatile for a single channel amp</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED You'll need to invest in a truss to lift it</p>	

→ heavy-duty transformers and ceramic valve sockets bolted firmly to the bombproof steel chassis. This arrangement is then housed in a 19mm lock-jointed plywood sleeve topped off with a chunky, leather carry handle.

As you can see from the internal shots, as much care has gone into the layout and neatness of the electronics as it has the external cosmetics. Both front and rear panels feature additional brushed stainless steel plates to help distinguish the RK 100 from the rest of the Cornford range. Richie Kotzen's signature unobtrusively adorns the front and appears again on the plate at the rear of the RK cabinet. Also round back we've got a series FX loops with respective send and return sockets, twin speaker output jacks and a switchable speaker impedance selector (four, eight and 16 Ohms). We've also got a pair of output valve failure fuses that protect your remaining valves should one of the quartet of JJ Tesla EL34s ever throw a seven. Should a failure occur the amp will continue to function but at half power (50-watts).

The amplifier head is covered with 'Kotzen' black Tolex as opposed to the



Things are just as smart and tidy inside the amp as they are on the surface

The amplifier head is covered with 'Kotzen' black Tolex as opposed to the usual Cornford ox blood

usual Cornford ox blood, and with a black amplifier it was only fitting to create a black cabinet. Richie's input in this area resulted in a straight-fronted, mono cabinet (he's not fond of angled cabs) loaded with a quartet of Celestion Vintage 30 1 x 12 speakers. The vintage style woven speaker cloth is a bit of a departure from Cornford's usual punched-metal kick grilles and, according to Cornford designer and 'ear' Martin Kidd, the cloth provides

just the right kind of filtering for the voice of this amp. "The metal grille would have sounded too harsh for this amp," adds Cornford boss Paul, who proudly goes on to explain the choice of speaker cable socket fitted to the cabinet. "Richie played so loud during testing that the air pressure created inside the prototype closed-back cabinet was sufficient to literally spit out the speaker cable from its socket," he says, adding with a wicked grin: →



The EL34 valves give the RK 100 a unique sound, but 6L6s can be added if you prefer

While this amp is ideally suited to high-gain, balls-to-the-wall playing, more subtle tones offer unparalleled depth

→ “The production cabinet remedies this with a Neutrik locking speaker cable connector, so you can play at trouser-flapping volumes all day.”

SOUNDS: One of the more notable features in terms of tone is the choice of EL34 output valves as opposed to the 6L6 valves of the Cornford MK50 which inspired this amp. On the whole the EL34s seem to compress a little more readily than 6L6s, are less hi-fi in terms of EQ and exhibit more upper-mid raunch, more British-ness. If we were to relate the sound to EQ curves then 6L6s would be a smile with tons of bass and high end and the EL34s would show more of a swelling in the mid-range. A simple bias switch enables you to switch tubes to 6L6, 5881 or Richie's own choice of EL34 valves fitted here.

To fully appreciate a 100W amp like this it's essential to run it at a decent volume, so you can hear the tonal contribution of the power output valves. In that respect it's obvious this amp is aimed at loud live performance and not bedroom players. That said, it is possible to get a terrific saturated gain sound (Cornford's brownest?) at reasonable volumes for practice.

We began testing the RK-100 set to a clean tone using Richie's signature Telecaster. In this instance the attenuation from the footswitch is already in place. By selecting neck and bridge pickups simultaneously, and with the humbucker in phase, the bold, glassy authority of the tone is

unleashed. The sound is incredibly clean and crisp with impressive percussive attack in the low end and an overall air of greatness that is as satisfying in its immediacy as it is in its promise of even better things to come. When tailoring a tone it's worth remembering the way that passive controls work. With all tone controls on maximum the amplifier is speaking its true voice. All adjustments are then to your taste. We were genuinely surprised at the vast array of tones on offer from this simple set-up and were able to conjure everything from jangly rhythm parts to growling blues and mean 'n' dirty bar-room brawl.

With a quick toe-tap on the 'Hot' switch, the attenuation is lifted, the brakes are off and this baby smoothly accelerates to full speed. Playing the RK 100 is enlightening in its purity. With such an uncluttered vibe and wholesome sound you're reminded of the incredible versatility of a simple, well-designed guitar, partnered with a simple, well-designed amp. No matter how much of the seemingly unlimited gain you dial in the guitar's character shines through and note definition remains paramount. Individual notes, even on heavily distorted chords, leap out with a clarity and transparency that few amplifiers can match.

Verdict

Guitar amplification like this can be compared to a Formula One car. It takes a skilled driver to get the best



Richie's own prototype model that would give birth to the RK 100

from a race car and it's the same with the RK 100. Experienced players will be able to fully harness the ample power on tap and use the controls on their instrument to fully direct the sonic action. While this amplifier is ideally suited to high-gain, balls-to-the-wall playing, the more subtle tones with lower gain settings cover a far broader tonal palette than we expected and offer unparalleled depth of tone. If you desire a creamy, overdriven, sustaining solo sound or a biting rock rhythm the RK 100 is a terrific place to start. It can kill passing pigeons at 100 yards when set to a clean sound, the headroom is just so massive, and if it's a truly spirited high-gain performance you're after Richie's amp is utterly inspiring. Compared to US boutique amps, where much of your dollar goes towards importing the unit, Cornford's value looks favourable. It's not cheap by any standards, but rest assured that every penny spent is an investment in tone, performance and British amp supremacy. 

Cornford RK 100

Guitarist RATING



The rivals

Laney GH100 TI	£549.99
Marshall JCM800 2203ZW	£950
Soldano Avenger	£1,199

Marshall's classic JCM800 got a few tweaks and a kick in the butt from Zakk Wylde to turn it into the monster it has now become. With a quartet of 6550 power valves and an FX loop, plus a neat custom finish, there's no mistaking that this amp had the Zakk attack. We tried one at the factory and it blew us into next year. Soldano's Avenger is simplicity itself, not a signature amp but equal in its 100 Watts of Soldano tone and nothing else - funny how top players like to keep it simple. Laney's GH100TI Tony Iommi head is a single-channel 100W with bass, middle, treble, high and low inputs and an FX loop. With a five level gain stage on at all times this head is most metal and its good value too

Richie's Cornford connections

Guitarist catches up with artist Richie Kotzen and amp designer Paul Cornford to get the full picture on the RK 100

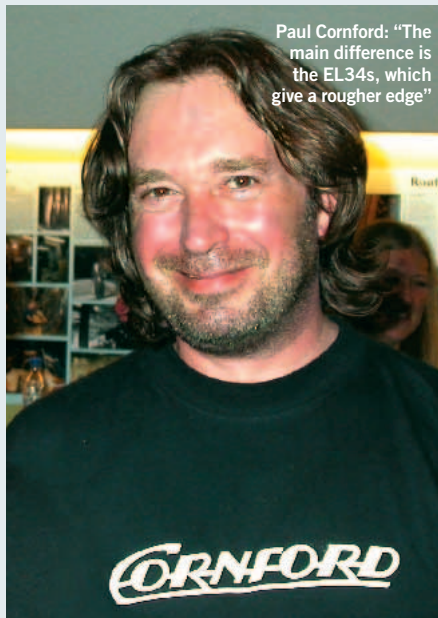
Paul Cornford: "We met Richie through Jamie Humphries, who had interviewed him when he was touring with Stanley Clarke. Jamie has used a Cornford MK50 for years and suggested to Richie that the amp would be exactly suited to his playing. Richie e-mailed us and said, "if you want to send me one to try, send me one and I'll try it!" That was autumn 2002. We sent him one to try and I think it sat in his living room for about six months not doing a great deal, then Richie broke his thumb playing basketball, so he couldn't play the guitar. We thought, "typical, he's scammed a bit of gear and we'll see our amp on ebay in a minute." Then suddenly, he was recording his album *Change* and tried it in his studio and that was it. The amp did its own talking and he loved it and it worked with exactly how he plays and what he's doing, what he's heading for. It was the first time he could get away from using a big amp with a fuzz box in the front.

"Richie's thing is that you see him live and he just has a guitar, a tuner, a cable and an amp. The MK50 was doing the whole thing. Clean, dirt and high-gain. Everything in one box. It's simple, pure and works with his signature Telecaster perfectly. The relationship started from then. We had him over in May 2003 to play some shows, then again in November for some clinics and Cornford Club gigs.

"Richie e-mailed me one day and said that we should put together an amp just for him because there were a lot of features on the MK50 that he doesn't use. He basically sets it up as a master volume head and does everything from the guitar. He cleans it up from the guitar, because he's a proper guitar player and he's not relying on four channels of god knows what, it's the organic approach. Richie said we should work on a signature amp so he could get exactly what he needs in a box. We got really stuck in to the design in spring 2004."

Richie Kotzen: "I told Paul what I wanted it to be like, what kind of tubes I wanted and how many knobs I wanted and what I wanted them to do. I re-recorded my song *Socialite* with an RK 100 prototype. On this visit we've really refined the design. We've just come up with an idea today, which is the gain switch. I was messing with the amp and loved the way it sounded when cleaned up from the guitar. So we've now got a footswitch socket on the front panel that pops a resistor into the path that kinda rolls back your guitar volume. I don't like having lots of buttons and switches on the amp other than the ones you really need. The back is simple too. It's kind of a completely different amp."

PC: "Basically Richie took what he loved about the MK50, the gain sounds, and then he's just added what he wants for his own use. The main difference is the EL34s which give the sound a rougher edge. It's not like we've taken an existing model and modified it. We've come up with something completely brand new, but still with a Cornford sound. We built this prototype on an MK50-sized chassis but we've decided to make it 10mm deeper to accommodate the massive transformers. The RK 100 is Richie's amp from the ground up, he's just



Paul Cornford: "The main difference is the EL34s, which give a rougher edge"



Richie Kotzen is impressed with the amp's "clean distortion"

taken the essence of what he loves about what we do and recreated a new amp just for him."

RK: "It's loud, powerful; the thing that is important to me, that's always been a part of the sound that I like, is having a clear distortion. No matter how much gain you have you can really hear your guitar. It's really clear and loud with less compression and a lot more headroom. I like it that if you play real light, the amp responds real lightly, but if you play real hard, the

amp reacts to that, so you get the real percussive thing on the notes to make 'em thump."

PC: "We've always said it's like a magnifying glass for the player. This amp has been really interesting for us because we've had the real, live R&D from Richie who's out there playing our amps on the road. I'm glad it's come out different, rather than mainstream. But it's not a quirky signature thing where no-one can play it but him – it will suit a lot of players."



Richie's signature Tele refines the original design

Fender Richie Kotzen Signature Telecaster

Price: £1,099

The Telecaster is arguably the simplest electric guitar on the planet. Two pickups, volume, tone and a neck bolted to a slab-of-wood body. Richie's signature guitar is a somewhat refined version of this basic formula. Firstly, the neck is a substantial chunk of maple: a gloriously palm-filling, meaty log with the bark taken off. Not the kind of neck you'd associate with such a fleet-fingered player, but when you see the huge frets you'll be reassured of its widdling potential. Next the pickups have been cleverly upgraded to a DiMarzio Chopper T mini humbucker in the bridge

position for a little more power and a DiMarzio Twang King in the neck position. The pickups are controlled with the usual three-way blade selector switch and the tone control has been replaced with a rotating switch that selects between in and out of phase for the bridge humbucker when the pickup selector is in the middle position. This gives the player a choice of fat or thin sounds.

Other modifications include gold hardware and the Schaller D-tuner: a flip-lever device for dropping the low E string down to a D. Finally, this through-strung, flame maple capped, bound Telecaster also features both ribcage and forearm contouring for an altogether classier appearance and comfier ride.