

DR Z Z WRECK

PRICE
£3,099

Arguably Dr Z's most upmarket amp to date, the eagerly awaited Z Wreck carries some serious boutique pedigree. David Greeves sizes up the damage

The genesis of this latest Dr Z creation goes back to 2006, when Tele picker extraordinaire Brad Paisley began talking to company founder Mike Zaito about designing a new amplifier. Zaito worked with long-time friend and collaborator Ken Fischer of Trainwreck Amps to build a prototype – dubbed the 'Z Wreck' – but when Fischer sadly passed away at the end of 2006, that was considered the end of the project.

Paisley used the amp extensively until the recent Nashville flood, which spared the original Z Wreck but ruined a number of his other amps and prompted Brad to commission two more as backup. And we should be thankful that he did, as this was the first step towards Dr Z's decision to take the project back to the drawing board and start producing the amp for the general public.

There's considerable hoodoo surrounding Trainwreck Amps, and not just because they're incredibly rare – Fischer completed only around 100 heads in his lifetime. They're also held in high regard for their tonal complexity and amazing response to touch and dynamics. While this is very much a new Dr Z amp rather than any kind of Trainwreck reissue, any new amp with such a strong Ken Fischer connection was always going to generate a huge amount of excitement in the valve amp community. And considering that both Fischer and Paisley, who was intimately involved in the design of the superb Prescription ES and Stang Ray amps, are closely tied to the



These NOS Russian EL84 valves were specially selected for the Z Wreck

history of the company, is it any wonder that Dr Z's legion of fanatics are in a positive lather of excitement over this new amp? We've managed to get our hands on the very first Z Wreck in the UK to find out if it can possibly live up to expectations.

Pre & Power Amp

There's a common thread running through many Dr Z designs, which tend to be single-channel amps with very few knobs. So it is with the Z Wreck, but as usual this apparent simplicity hides some considerable sophistication. Many people, ourselves included, believe that the most pure, direct and responsive valve tones are to be found in the most simple circuits, but the real magic is in the fine detail.

Here we find a single channel

with a single input and controls for volume, treble, bass and cut.

Looking around the rear, a pair of 12AX7s are used by the preamp, with a third in the phase splitter position. In the power amp, there's a quartet of NOS Russian EL84s specially selected for the Z Wreck, while a 5AR4 rectifier valve completes the line-up.

A key feature of the amp is the output transformer, which was designed by Ken Fischer for Dr Z in the early noughties. Without wishing to exceed the limits of our own technical knowledge – it's playing through amps that gets us excited, not building them – the output transformer is the part of the amp that takes signal amplified by the power valves and in turn drives the speaker, and it's crucial in shaping the sound and response, or 'feel', of the amp.

Meanwhile, the power transformer (which takes AC mains power and turns it into the correct DC voltage required by the valves) has a neat trick up its sleeve. The Z Wreck's power transformer – which, we're told, is a new design – has been tapped so that you can switch between two different plate voltages via a switch at the rear of the amp. These settings are labelled 'Comfort' and 'Speed' (inspired, we sincerely hope, by the great Willie Dixon/Howlin' Wolf number, 'Built For Comfort'). The former is said to offer a softer, sweeter and altogether more vintage response, while the latter is the place to go for a stronger attack, more clarity and more headroom. Intriguing stuff.

Cabinets & Speakers

In terms of looks, the majority of Dr Z amps to date have leant towards the functional, prioritising build quality and tone over any cosmetic embellishments. This is very much in keeping with the company's aim of delivering outstanding performance at a lower price than much of the US boutique competition. The Z Wreck is clearly a special project, however, and Dr Z has fittingly pushed the boat out this time, with handwriting-style silver text, lightly figured maple panels and a custom Tolex covering dubbed 'quantum silver'. The overall effect is very impressive, and it's nice to see a high-quality mains lead and speaker cable, as well as head and cab covers embroidered with the Z Wreck logo, included.

The head and cab come as a set



REVIEW AMPLIFIER

DR Z Z WRECK



DR Z Z WRECK

Price: £3,099 (head & cab)
Built in: USA
Type: All-valve head
Power: 30 watts (48 watts peak @ 4 ohm)
Valves: 4 x 7189 (EL84), 3 x 12AX7, 1 x 5AR4
Features: Single channel with volume, bass, treble & cut controls; 'Comfort/Speed' power transformer tap switch, 3 x speaker outputs (4, 8 & 16 ohm); head & cab covers, speaker cable & mains lead included
Dimensions: 232(h) x 524(w) x 241(d) mm
Weight: 14.5kg (32lbs)

Z WRECK CAB

Built in: USA
Type: 2x12 open back
Speakers: 1 x Celestion Blue, 1 x Celestion Gold
Dimensions: 546(h) x 699(w) x 254(d) mm
Weight: 23.6kg (52lbs)

CONTACT DETAILS

Peach Guitars
Tel: 01376 553016
www.drzamps.com

GB VERDICT

GOLD STARS

- ★ Truly first-class tones
- ★ Flexible 'comfort/speed' switch
- ★ Great looks and top-notch build quality

BLACK MARKS

- None, though your bank manager won't be happy

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone seeking exceptional dynamics and sublime vintage tone, Tele players in particular

GB RATING



and are not available separately. This may disappoint some, but they're designed specifically to work in tandem. The open-backed cab is fitted with Brad Paisley's favoured combination of a Celestion Blue and a Celestion Gold. These Alnico speakers are wired in series, with the higher powered Gold first to soak up the watts and the Blue second. Again, that's what Brad does and according to Dr Z this setup provides the best results.

Sounds

With the Z Wreck powered up and ready to rock, from the first chord it's clear that we're in for a real treat. There's plenty of Vox-y character to this amp in terms of lively top end, but the rich, full and complex mid range is really something special. Every last drop of tone is rung out of those Alnico speakers and the transient response – the clarity of the initial note attack before it blooms into natural valve compression and sustain – is simply joyous.

Plugging in a Telecaster, we can see why Brad Paisley is such a fan of this amp. The bridge pickup's brightness and twang are here, along with huge dollops of meaty mid range snarl, but the highs never become sharp or unpleasant. Perhaps more surprising is how great this amp sounds with a Les Paul – chunkier than Leslie West, but still with that astonishing bite and clarity that makes each note seem to pop and shimmer.

The cut and tone controls will be familiar to Dr Z fans and work as well as ever; though in reality the core tone is so good we can't see anyone wanting to make extensive adjustments. With the volume knob set low, sparkling clean tones abound. As volume is increased,



The Z Wreck can handle any cab



break-up comes on fairly quickly, but it's a natural, organic overdrive that proves very responsive to dynamics.

The Z Wreck is perhaps at its best with the volume around or a little past half way, where you can exploit its exceptional response to guitar's volume knob. Rolling this back progressively cleans up the sound with little apparent loss in volume or high end. Even the neck pickup on our Les Paul remain clear-sounding down to 1 on the volume knob! Be aware that this is a loud gigging amp, though, and will reveal its best on stage, not at bedroom levels.

The real ace in the hole is the 'comfort/speed' switch. Set to



A pair of Alnico speakers are used

'comfort', the note attack is a little softer, the overdrive warmer and the overall feel is one of a smooth, rich-sounding and well worn-in vintage amp. Flicking over to 'speed' seems to bring up the bass and treble, without losing any mids, and gives a stiffer, tighter feel. We can see this facility being incredibly useful when it comes to delivering the tone you want at the volume level you want with the particular guitar you're using.

Conclusion

What more can we say about this magnificent amplifier? We've been thoroughly impressed by every Dr Z amp we've reviewed, and this is no exception. In many ways, the Z Wreck feels less like a new amp and more like the concentrated distillation of everything Dr Z is about – simplicity, superb vintage tone and the kind of dynamic response that makes you feel like your hands, the guitar and the amp are one. At over £3,000, it's undeniably expensive (though this does include the brilliant 2x12 cab with premium Alnico speakers) but if any amp is special enough – and can make the player feel special enough – to justify this outlay, then the Z Wreck certainly can. And how! **GB**