BACK PANEL
Power socket, fuse, two outputs. Footswitch: no need. FX loop? Phooey!

Dr Z Z28
22W 'Boutique' Head

AMERICAN TUBE AMP MAKER DR Z is celebrating 15 years in the biz, and we join the party by checking out the latest back-to-basics offering. Dave Hunter samples and savours

Over the course of two decades, the handmade valve amp brigade has touted a very retro 'less is more' ethos. What's the philosophy? It couldn't be simpler: minimum features between input and output means maximum tone. Many fans of the breed would heartily argue that few makers cram in as little – yet come out with more than – as the good Dr Z.

Founder/designer Mike Zaite has made a veritable feature of offering few or no 'features' on his amps; some carry as few as two controls, others just three or four (he does make a channel-switching amp of sorts, but that's the real odd one out in the catalogue). Time and again the Dr Z formula says 'stick in a good guitar, mess with the signal as little as possible while it makes the obligatory journey through quality resistors, capacitors, valves and transformers, and you'll be happy with what comes out'. Overwhelmingly, players and critics seem to agree. Aside from great sounds, the bonus in all this for the cost-conscious amp buyer – to put it into boneheaded simple terms – is that fewer knobs equals less dosh. Dr Z's 2xEL84-based 2x10" Carmen Ghia combo (with just Volume and Tone) sells for a good £400 less than the similarly formatted Matchless Lightning, which comes with Volume, Bass, Treble and Master.

The Z28 in question, therefore, is right up the Dr Z pipeline. There are just three controls on the front – Volume, Bass and Treble – along with Standby and Power switches, and only 4Ω and 8Ω speaker outs and a fuse socket on the back. Simplicity reigns within, too, compared to any four-channel maxi-amp of today, but that's not to say there aren't plenty of clever tricks afoot in this circuitry.

This amp's output section employs a pair of Yank-toned 6V6s in a fixed-bias class AB circuit for a rated 22W of power. Coupled with the control layout you might be thinking 1960s brown or blackface Deluxe, the non-reverb variant, but the Z28 departs considerably from there. It shares a preamp section and tone stack with its big brother, the Route 66, an amp which uses a pair of larger KT66 valves to generate a 32W output, although here the former is tweaked for the 6V6 voicing. At the heart of this is a lesser-seen high-gain EF86 pentode preamp valve, as used in the Matchless D/C30 and a few other esoteric designs, but shunned by many makers because of its tendency toward microphony. Dr Z employs a selected Groove Tubes EF86 in a bid to avoid such problems, and the 6V6s are quality GT valves, too.

Z28	£1149

The EQ section is a highly interactive and effective design that is very different from the familiar Fender, Marshall and Vox topologies, and the phase inverter stage employs an NOS GE 5751 – sort of a lower-gain 12AX7 variant – which I haven't seen used in any major contemporary design. The Z28 is valve rectified, with a Sovtek 5AR4 taking AC/DC conversion duties.

The internal workmanship is a real pleasure to behold: electrolytics are from Sprague and JJ, signal caps are all SBE 'Orange Drops' (the successor to Sprague), and neat and heavy-duty wire runs connect the lot. Solder joints are all double-checked by hand and

daubed with a tamperproof red marker. There's a hefty choke in the filtering chain, and the output transformer is a sweet and very vintage-looking paper-bobbin type. The entire construction practically screams 'tone!' even before you plug in.

Dr Z now offers their amps in black, blonde and red vinyl. Ours is black, with a stylish white-flecked grille cloth and that minimalistic, jagged-Z logo. The cab is a solid plywood effort with black metal corner protectors all round. It's a real cutie, too, with a 'mini amp' look that belies its performance. At 43x23x24cm and just 8.2kg (18lb), it's one of the most compact gigworthy heads you're likely to sling into your Mini, and almost a pleasure to lift.

No real detractors thus far, then. I did wonder, however, why the 'Z28' name when it's rated at 22W, but it probably ties in with Zaite's usual sports car wordplay, as in 'Datsun 280Z' – an American (or, presumably, Japanese) boy racer's fave of the late 1970s.

Dr Z's UK importer, Peach Guitars of Braintree, Essex, do stock many combo versions as well as a few speaker cabs, but they don't carry so many of the latter as they do heads. Such is the thinking with many importers of boutique American amps: however good the cabs might be, the rewards of shipping a hollow plywood box with a couple speakers in it often doesn't justify the effort and expense. That's not to belittle Dr Z's reputedly excellent cabs in any way, and Peach plans to stock even more of them in future. For now, we have the head alone, tested through a closed-back 2x12" carrying a pair of reissue Celestion Alnico Blue speakers. I tested the amp with a Fender Strat and a Gibson SG.

SOUNDS

Outwardly, this would appear a very limited amp. But the Z28's design integrity and the cleverness of its three simple but wide-ranging controls make this a tool that offers a surprising number of voices.

Starting with both tones flat (at 12 o'clock), there's a surprising amount of headroom right up to about halfway on the Volume. The sound is firm, crisp, responsive and full-throated, with a delightfully balanced frequency response and no midrange humps or treble spikes to startle the ears. 6V6s are characteristically juicy, thick, easily compressed and slightly gritty, and there's some of that here – in a good way in all senses – but none of this output valve's occasional floppy, loose low end.

Low-string riffs on the Z28 are tight and snappy, and there's impressive girth to the whole lower register, though of course it's no gut-thumping nu-metal monster. Set like this, the amp offers stunning country, jazz, or clean rock/blues voices, and also makes a great template for anything you could conceivably want to do with pedals.

Zaite's design is already revealing plenty of originality in these sonic results, but there's more to come. Many 20W boutique amps tend to go straight for the crunch, with tweed or cranked small Vox/Marshall voicings at their heart, but the Z28 gives you the option of a bold, punchy clean sound too. Also, other designs that use the EF86 preamp generally employ it in high-gain channels that are dirty from the off – I'm thinking the Matchless D/C30 and John Jorgenson models. The good Dr Z, on the other hand, has couched this valve in a more high-fidelity, full-frequency circuit to transfer as broad a soundscape as possible to the following stages of the amp, and it's working so far.

But you want some crunch and filth, perhaps, and might even desire them at lower volume? Fear not: there are a few nifty tricks up the Z28's sleeve. Wind both Bass and Treble up towards the 3/4 position and beyond, and the tone stack transfers a hotter signal to the output stage – even with the Volume still down around the 10:30 to 12 o'clock region – and, hey presto, crunchville here we come. Tweed Fender Deluxes and Tremoluxes do this, their single Tone controls acting as much as a second gain stage as a treble bleed, but I haven't seen it in many two-control tone stacks. It's glorious stuff, and yields a corpulent breakup with full-volume dynamics and playability at small-room levels.

Wind Volume up towards two o'clock and you're easing in to what proves to be my favourite setting on this amp. Turning the Strat's volume down to 6 gives a sweet clean-with-bite tone that's still muscular and bounteous; roll it up to 8 for punchy crunch or all the way up to 10 for crackling, hot blues and rootsy rock'n'roll lead sounds. Superb. This degree of guitar volume control is often a good omen of a valve amp's integrity, and Z28 is delighted to oblige. Throughout the varying degrees of dirt the tone remains sparkling, rich, and full-bodied, with glorious tinklings of upper harmonics but none of the harshness and over-brightness that many small amps give you... EL84-based amps in particular.

Between three-quarters and maximum on the Volume there's no increase of level, just useful added shades of saturation and compression, and a slightly different touchy-feeliness... and as for the fabled EF86 microphony, we can detect none whatsoever. Throughout, this is a very sensitive, responsive amp – one you feel you could play all day without tiring of. It's not an amp for every style, since it clearly lacks heavy rock or modern shred sounds, but I can find no flaws whatsoever with the Z28's sound and performance. Breathtaking stuff.

FACTFILE

DR Z Z28

Description: hand-built, single channel, 22W all-valve head with 1xEF86 pentode preamp valve, 1x5751 PI and 2x6V6s output; valve rectification. Made in USA

RRP: £1149

Controls: Volume, Bass, Treble

Features: Tone

Range Options: Z28 2x10" combo £1349, Carmen Ghia head £799 and 2x10" combo £1199, Route 66 head £1399, 1x12" cab £449, 2x12" cab £749.

Contact: Peach Guitars ☎ 01376 553016

Web: www.DrZAmps.com

VERDICT

This is a well-built and gorgeous sounding little amp, and one with enough muscle to cut it at plenty a decent-sized gig, too (plugged into an efficient 2x12", it will give many 50-watters a run for their money in most clubs). It's no budget option, and you still need to figure a speaker cab into your outlay, but it comes in at a more affordable price than many of Dr Z's US boutique rivals, with no discernible compromises in components or construction. What impresses us most, however, is the uniqueness of the design, namely in Mike Zaite's willingness to step away from the tweed Fender and vintage Vox/Marshall line that most other boutiquers toe. The Z28 is gloriously simple to use, yet offers up a deceptively broad palette of voices, all of them delectable. Tempted? Hop on down to the doctor's to get your own prescription filled.