

to the baffle while it is out of the cabinet. Then reinstall the chassis first and screw the baffleboard back on with your new speaker mounted. We tried a Warehouse 15W Black & Blue Alnico and a '60s Jensen C12Q before pulling out a Celestion G12H30 70th Anniversary Hellatone, which turned out to be the best by far. The big magnet and motor on the Hellatone immediately enhanced the perceived power and fidelity of the Falcon. If you acquire one of these amps consider a speaker upgrade to be essential, and don't be concerned about pulling the baffleboard. Gibson used some short, nifty screws and combined washers that make safely removing and reinstalling the baffleboard very easy.



Despite what we had read online about the sweet 'overdriven' tone of the Falcon, our amp doesn't produce much overdriven tone even fully dimed on 10.

Maybe a hint of woolliness in the mids, but more or less clean, yet the clean tones are very complex and musical – exceptionally so. The clean nature of the Gibson also makes it... you guessed it – the ultimate pedal amp. We alternately ran the Falcon with our Bob Burt clean boost (Z Vex SHO knockoff), the Xotic Effects RC Booster and Xotic EP Booster with tremendous results. If there is a better sounding amp paired with overdrive effects we have yet to hear it. With a good pedal the Falcon acquires a lush character with a rippin' attitude that defines the quintessential sound of rock & roll guitar, yet one that is not so easily pegged as being in the Fender or the Marshall camp. There is some Vox lurking in the Falcon – not the chimey jangle, but an upper mid tone that lives right in the heart of an electric guitar. When you hear it, you'll quickly understand why this quirky, under-rated and downright cheap Gibson relic is absolutely one of the last affordable vintage amps truly worth pursuing. Add the freaky tremolo, the exceptional reverb, and you've got a Kalamazoo classic that will deliver you to places your other amps cannot go. We paid \$400 for our Falcon, footswitch included, and there are plenty of them to be found. *Quest forth...to*

## Retro King Master 50

*You may recall our December 2010 interview with Retro King amps founder Chuck Dean and our review of the Retro King 18 watt. Chuck has spent much of his career as a builder and tech working on, restoring and optimizing vintage Marshall*



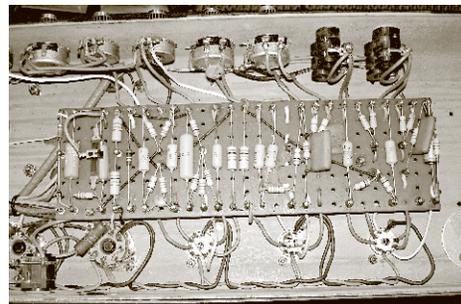
*amplifiers while creating his own versions of classic Marshall amps. His new Master 50*

*model is based on a JCM800 with some key enhancements, and our review follows Chuck's interesting comments on the amps he knows best. Enjoy...*

**TQR:** Just about all of us are at least familiar with music recorded with the classic Marshall amps from the JTM 45, Plexi and the metal panel eras, but we're betting that most players today have never actually torched a vintage JTM 45, Plexi or those that followed from '69-'72 before Marshall went to PCBs... Chuck, can you please provide a brief overview of the most significant differences in design and sound between the original Plexi amps and the 50W and 100W heads that followed?

The first JTM45s were made to emulate the original tweed Bassman, but they didn't have access to or use the same parts as Fender. They used Radiospares transformers, and they started off with tube rectifiers and power transformers that put less than 390V on the plates, which is quite a bit less than the amps they built later. The JTM 45 is actually only about 32 watts.

**TQR:** I have played through one early JTM45 and it was quite a bit cleaner than what most people would associate with the Marshall sound.



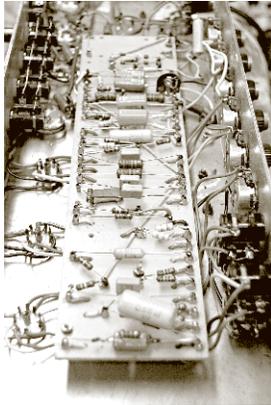
Back then the cathodes on both channels shared the same bypass cap and the same resistor.

That made it sound cleaner, and they were using the same values as the components in the Bassman. The very first Plexis were pretty much the same story – the first ones were tube rectified with shared cathodes on the first stage. The first 50 watt still had a tube rectifier, but they split the cathodes, which changed how fast the amp distorted and the level of headroom. Then they changed the slope resistors, which changed the upper midrange and high end response. Next they went to solid state rectifiers and beefed up all the filter caps which made the amps sound tighter in the late '60s. The metal panel amps had some values changed to increase the high end by using low

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value coupling caps that gave it more gain and more high end.

**TQR:** And they kept making changes throughout the '70s...



Yeah, and a lot of people will pay extra money for the handwired amps but they all have the *potential* to be really good – even the early '70s amps with printed circuit boards. I've owned them all and I have worked on them all, and maybe one in ten would be a really good one. They had poor wiring skills, inductance and noise, poor grounding schemes... It seems as if it depended on who did the work. It wasn't just a matter of tone, but noise and inductance.

**TQR:** So either they didn't know any better, or they knew and just didn't care...

Probably a little of both. They would put an amp together a certain way, and the windings on the transformers weren't all that consistent, so it was a crapshoot, and every once in a while you would get an amp that sounded really good. It seemed like an accident, though.

**TQR:** In addition to the Plexi 18, RK45 and Plexi 50, you are now building the Master 50 that we received for review. In terms of features and tone, where does this new amp fit within your other Retro King models and does it have anything in common with amps built by Marshall in the past?



I modeled it after the first JCM800, so it has the single channel with a low and high input. It has

all the gain of the JCM800 but with the fat tone of the earlier Marshalls, and a lot less noise. I consider the Master 50 to be my ultimate rock amp, but smoother with more harmonic content. It's not woofy and it takes pedals much better. It also has an effects loop. Basically, I used all the things I have learned and refined from people bringing me original JCM800s to make them sound better.

**TQR:** Describe the function of the mini toggle switch on the Master 50.



On a lot of the Marshall amps they had a .68 cap on the second stage. The 50W amps had it, but sometimes they would leave it out. It adds a little more gain and upper midrange with that second stage cathode cap in play, so if you are playing a 335 or a humbucker that is a little darker it is a nice thing to have.

**TQR:** What types of power tubes can be used in the Master 50 and how will different tubes affect the sound?

The best tubes to use are EL-34s because the primary impedance of the output transformer is 3.4K, and that's optimum for that tube. You can use 6L6s or 6550s but they like to see a higher primary impedance, so you would need to change the output transformer.

**TQR:** How would you compare the tone, power and dynamic character of the Master 50 with your RK45 and Plexi 50?

It has more gain. You can get a nice overdriven sound at a reasonable volume level, but it will also take pedals well. I was getting requests for an amp from guys that play heavier rock, so this is my answer to that, but I wouldn't call it a metal amp by any means.

**TQR:** This is a physically big head – is it also available as a combo?



I am eventually going to make a combo and also a 100 watt head. The head you have was made for a 4x12 cab, but I can make it smaller for a 50 watt combo with

one or two 12s. It sounds great with a Strat or a Les Paul and I try to voice my amps so they work well and sound great with all kinds of guitars and pickups.

**TQR:** What's ahead, Chuck? What do you have planned for the future?

The new bass amp that is coming out is all done. I'm having a special transformer built for it by Mercury Magnetics, and I had to have an output transformer that mounted tall to keep the size of the amp down and not weigh a ton, yet

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handle low frequencies really well. It's rated at 60 watts but it's way cleaner and louder than 60 watts using 6550s. I'm getting every bit of headroom and bass response available out of it, and it's switchable from 2, 4, and 8 ohms for different cabinet configurations. I named it after a friend of mine that just passed away and it's called the Cassell Super Bass.

## Retro King Master 50



Nothing sounds quite like a Marshall, and the Master

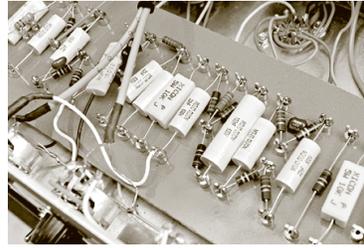
50 clearly delivers a carefully crafted classic Marshall vibe and voice in a modern package that is road ready. Prices for '70s Marshall 50 watt amps have come down a little, not that sellers aren't still trying to get two grand or more for them, but by and large it ain't happening. We have seen a few 4-input '70s Marshall 50 watt heads sell for as little as \$1,200 recently, but it is rare to find one that hasn't been modded... There are a lot of '70s Marshall heads and '80s JCM800s in circulation, but as Chuck Dean correctly observed, buying a used Marshall presents a big crapshoot – even new these amps varied wildly in tone and by now you can expect to spend some money with your amp tech to get an old Marshall sounding right. Sometimes they never do.



The Master 50 offers a convenient detour from the road to restoration and it delivers authentic Marshall tones at variable volume levels

with a very useful effects loop. Build quality as pictured far surpasses the typical Marshall circuit circa 1980, meticulously handwired with premium trannies, a tone stack that actually works, and an effective master volume that gives up the goods without blowing down the house. What a great idea... The toggle switch for the .68 cap is also a very cool and useful feature that can add brightness, definition and a slight volume boost to darker pickups.

This isn't one of those Marshall 'clones' that pretends to be a vintage JTM45 or Plexi... You can expect more gain and



faster levels of smooth distortion in the style of a JCM800. We ran the Master 50 through our straight front 4x12 cabinet loaded with British Greenbacks acquired years ago from

Midtown Music, and our birch-ply cabinet has been enhanced with genuine reproduction Bluesbreaker pinstripe grill cloth made by Eric Collins. It isn't cheap, but the original formula does make a significant difference in tone. The fabric acts as a baffle that creates a unique tone while attenuating volume. See [www.bluesbreaker-pinstripe.com/](http://www.bluesbreaker-pinstripe.com/). The Master 50 sounds huge through the 4x12, but the volume and master volume levels can be mixed for slightly cleaner tones with the master up and volume set lower, or opposite settings will deliver

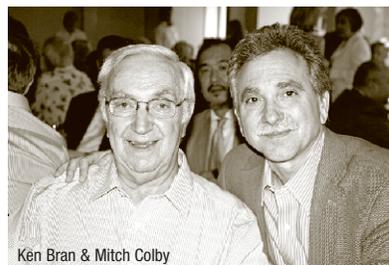


more intense distortion and overdriven tones. This amp also sounds very good at lower

volume levels, with none of the thin preamp distortion fizz you may have heard in some master volume amps. The presence, bass, midrange and treble controls shape tone very well when switching from different guitars, and our Telecaster and Strat sounded great through the Master 50 with some EQ and volume adjustments. Chuck was also correct when he commented that this amp sounds good with overdrive pedals, especially with the Master 50 controls set cleaner – Master volume higher than Volume, right? We also used the Wampler Faux Tape Echo and our Fender reissue reverb unit with outstanding results, and the effects loop really makes all the difference. For those about to rock, the Master 50 is a truly great amplifier – big enough to sound like only a big amp can, yet user friendly and fully capable of sounding like a big Marshall at far less than full tilt boogie. Recommended, \$2,200 as reviewed. [To](http://www.retrokingamps.com)

[www.retrokingamps.com](http://www.retrokingamps.com), 315-673-3435

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