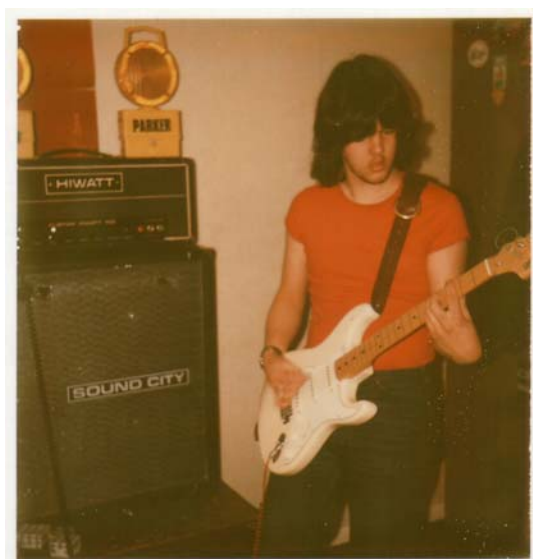


Sheriff Amp – The true story, andy@custardclub.com, 07734 038754

The true story of the Sheriff Amp.

Don't get me wrong, I love valve amplifiers, particularly British ones, I have owned a few classics over the years, Hiwatt, Marshall JMP heads and combos, and even a Yankee upstart Mesa Boogie. I have also owned several tranny Marshall's a Peavey Bandit and even used a POD with a PA amp. I have loved them all, even the uncontrollable Hiwatt, they all have their own character, idiosyncrasies, gifts and flaws, its always good fun to find the sweet spot in each amp. What it all boils down to is this, if you think it sounds good, it is good, end of argument.



Me in 76, with stolen light system.

What really annoys me are the gear snobs who look down their noses at the only sort of gear available to us mere mortals. These snobs seem to forget that most of us started out playing a cheap amp and a copy guitar and we had fun doing it. Those sounds we made inspired us to practice, to form bands and even talk to drummers, we all want better gear who wouldn't but don't forget your roots. We all know a guitar snob or two, when only a ten top PRS with bats (or is it birds) and a back up relic Strat will do, Vintage snobs who DNA profile the sweat between the frets to prove Kossoff once played it for ten minutes in a Denmark Street shop back in the day, and they have a colour chart to check the yellowing of binding. Then there are amp snobs, who talk about Russian valves, point-to-point hand wiring, a reverb made from one of Elvis's bedsprings. I think you should use your ears to buy an amp, rather than be seduced by the exclusive price tag and the fables built up around the builder. Why do we need to be told that he built his first guitar amp out of his granddads old valve radiogram and an orange box, then sold it to Eddie Van Jovi.

A boutique amp can be a thing of beauty and it may sound wonderful, the maker has to be innovative to get attention not only in the sounds the thing makes but also in the style and finish and of course top quality is always paramount. In the early days this new maker needs to sell every thing he makes so he makes to order,

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that's going to be expensive but exclusive. Once the new small maker is established he can up production but the price will stay high, not because his cost are still high but because the product is pitched at a price point that balances maximum return on full production. There is nothing wrong with this it makes good business sense, whatever your hobby or interest there are small manufacturers charging the top prices for the exclusive product. So if you understand all this and still want that pink tolex BogDano then go for it and have fun, the satisfaction of ownership will be worth it and it may be a good investment to boot.

The problem is its easy to be so dazzled by your wonderful rare beast that you look down your nose at "mass market products" its just soo corporate, I have heard mates of mine say they could never play a Peavey or a Crate, or the only Marshall they would have must be thirty years old, yet I then have set the tone for them on their supa doopa Californian box of tricks because it feeds back like a bingo caller on acid. It's easy to diss the big manufacturers but after all what were the first amps built by Marshall if not boutique, remember, if it sounds good it is good.

So how did the Sheriff come about?

My son, bless his cotton socks, was using my AVT 100 Marshall combo, on a more or less permanent basis. So when I was offered a non-working 1970's Marshall JMP50 2x12 combo I jumped at it. Phil at Pacific Sound soon got the JMP singing so I was happy, we both had an amp we liked, or so I thought. My sons band was doing well and it was getting a little serious, however the sound he wanted was more American, we tried to get the sound with the AVT but when we were offered a mint Boogie Trem-a-verb and at a good price, well the two Marshall's had to be sold to raise the required cash. The Boogie does sound awesome and my son is very pleased with it but he didn't forget his old Dad, no not my lad, he gave me his old Marshall MG 30 watt combo, I was supposed to grateful! This was his first amp which I had got for him many years earlier, nice little amp I remember saying at the time, a bit condescending in hindsight. I got the "gift" home and plugged it in, actually this little amp did sound good, it was packed with features and much more user friendly than a vintage valve amp that is only happy at ear bleeding volumes. So lets turn this little beauty up and see what she will do, err not so good, more fizz than a can of Stella in a washing machine while on the 1200 rpm spin cycle. On a whim I disconnected the 8" speaker and hooked up the little amp up to a 30 year old beat up 2x12 pa cab. The difference was simply amazing, still had the low volume tones for late night riffing, but turn the wick up and I had a tone rich beast, no fizz just guts.

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I decided then and there to free this little tranny amp from its combo cab and turn it into a head. But what would my amp snob mates say, who cares I thought but hang on, this is an opportunity for some fun and some point proving.

This little amp needed to be pimped, it had to look as good as it sounded, tread plates and neon tubes, bells and whistles, glamour and glitz. Over the next few weeks many ideas went round in my head, it needed more than just a metal top plate, and some fancy knobs, it needed credibility I suppose it needed valves. At first I thought of fitting dummy valves backlit with orange lights. I could imagine the great unveiling, the valves would be lit the amp would roar, the deception would be complete. But would deception be enough for me, no I wanted more, humiliation at least, anti amp snob ammunition to use long into the future, a bold and unforgettable lesson and of course a good laugh.

The vision evolved, valves, valves, valves, in fact four Ford Fiesta 1.4 CVH inlet valves across the back, four Schrader tyre valves in front with fancy red caps, amp builders always refer to capacitors as caps, but these would be actual caps. Perhaps a 15mm brass water valve and some copper pipe where a transformer would normally be. Lots of shiny tread plate, steel grill, chrome handles and knobs, if I built it well I knew it could work.

The speakers in the old PA cab were Goodman's 12" Audioms, I don't know much about them I just know they sounded good, better in fact than a pair of green backs I tried later, perhaps the Audioms have softer cones so work better with a small amp, a lesson for cab snobs too. However the old cab was in a dreadful state and not the right proportion for the proposed head. I looked everywhere for a solution, my first thought was a cab kit, they used to exist I remember a mate building some bass bins in the 80's, but can I find any kits now? Ebay found some rubbish cabs worse than the one I had, or your standard Marshall 2 x 12, which is a great cab but not easily disguised as a boutique cab.

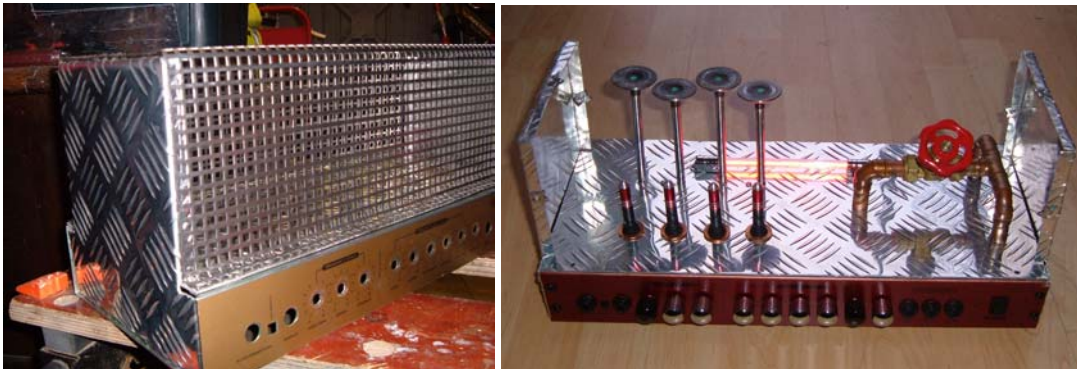
However ebay also found me a supplier called Tube Town, just check them out, www.tube-town.de I was so impressed with what they offered and the prices looked good too. I contacted Tube Town's Dirk Munzinger who turned out to be a top bloke,

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I specified the dark red tolex with oxblood cloth, he thought it may not look so good and suggested that a lighter tolex or black works best with the oxblood grill cloth, he could have just taken my money and sent me what I had asked for. I thought it through and took his advice and I ordered a fender style 2 x 12 cab in 18mm ply with fender chrome corners and fittings, rough blonde tolex and oxblood with gold thread grill cloth. Two weeks later and my custom built cab arrived on my doorstep and for only £120 all in, beat that. I cannot fault the quality of his workmanship, I just loved that cab from the moment I unpacked it.

My little amp needed a name, a play on words with Marshall, as in Wild West! At first I thought about outlaw but that indicates some sought of dishonesty, may give the game away, in the end it had to be Sheriff, after all a Sheriff aspires to be a Marshall.

I had all the parts I needed and a plan of action, a few sketches and loads of enthusiasm. Using the original chassis I started fabricating the bolt on bits, bending metal, cutting and drilling, in hindsight better tools and a slower pace would have given me sharper bends and tighter corners but at first this was just a joke, right? As work progressed it became more serious, I became convinced that this was actually a good idea. The little sheriff was all I thought of, to the point that when it was finished I immediately started thinking about doing another!



I sprayed the Marshall gold front panel with clear red metallic so it had a deep lustrous red finish and allows the original pot markings and indicator lights to show through. Chrome and black (volume) knurled knobs finished off the panel, a tin sheriffs badge worked well with the black painted steel grill valve cover and it was almost done. I had modified the rear panel to take a kettle lead and speaker jack and left it brushed steel.

After mounting the Goodman's speakers in the tube town cab and wiring them to 4 ohms I had to have an immediate test blast. I don't know if it was the red neon light glinting off the sheriffs badge and the array of "valves", or the quality of the cab, all I know is the little stack made a real Marshall sound with a great range of tones and that it worked well at all volumes.

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I had been thinking about how to play the unveiling, I started dropping hints in conversations that I fancied a unique amp, something special, “the last amp I would ever own” I announced dramatically. Of course my friends advised me, did I want Marshall, Fender, or Vox inspired, vintage or new, American or British, what valves did I like EL34’s Fireball XL5’s Mazda MX5’s, etc etc. I would drip feed my ideas, THD 30 watt and a 2 x 12 cab, Cornford or a Bognor combo, then there’s Soldano, it was all I talked of for the period of the Sheriff build, I wanted to build an amp snob feeding frenzy.

With days of the build to go I dropped out that I had come across something special, some thing that stirred my soul. I was pestered about the details, I said they would have to wait and see, but I could give a few clues. Over the next week or so I dropped out that it had nine valves, that shook them up, one suggestion in jest was a new mountain bike and 7 spare inner tubes (closest guess so far). The thirty watts got them, a special built by Randall Smith, an old hot rodded Vox? The head and cab clue left them even more confused, how many valves did the thirty watt THD have, perhaps some of the valves were not used all the time so you could swap them like the Hotplate, the debate raged?

Excitement mounted as the great day arrived, I tried to remain calm, I rehearsed the questions I thought I would be asked, I had played with the lighting to give the best effect for the neon tube and the “valves”. I tried all the room positions, checked the seating positions, even worked out what to play and what settings to use.

The neon tube was on, channel switcher plugged in and the mean channel selected, as my audience arrived I hit that first chord that blasted from the rough blond cab.



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Initial impression was favourable, approving nods and quizzical looks I had expected the illusion to last a minute or two, until that is they looked through the grill saw the Ford Fiesta valves and a brass tap! Then we could all go to the pub and have a good laugh about it. But they swallowed it all hook line and sinker, they took my guitar and asked me to make adjustments, less middle, little more gain, back off the reverb, try the clean channel, still more approving nods. I started dropping hints that it was like a small Marshall, no comments, tongue in cheek I referred to the inlet valves, pneumatic valve stems and a hydro valve. I think what finally gave it away was when got the empty Marshall combo cab from the garage and put it next to the sheriff! The penny slowly dropped, as did a few jaws.

Point made and lots of laughs, followed by a full build story and the obvious question, why? But does the Sheriff sound as good to them now that the truth is out, well what can they say apart from they didn't want to offend me by saying the sheriff sounded like a £100 tranny amp with its speaker ripped off. Well I don't care what anyone thinks the Sheriff sounds good to me, reaction from the snobs, nice old speakers, a Marshall 20 watt hand wired head would be great with that cracking cab! Oh well I tried.

