

Under 40 Watt of Whoop Ass

By David Boze

How often are you playing really big rooms, concert halls, and outdoor venues? If the answer is "not often," then stop hauling that Twin or VibroKing to your next club date and cop some real Tone. TQR's resident Fender amp wizard, Dave Boze, reports on the best small club amps, revealing a few secrets that may change your opinion about one of Leo's most underrated and overlooked amplifiers.

Let me first state that I am a huge Fender amp fan. While I appreciate the wonderful tones produced by Voxes, Marshalls, and Ampegs, as a player, I've always come back to Fenders. And as a technician, I appreciate the fact that Leo Fender designed his amps to be so easily serviced, maintained and toneful.

So you're looking for a great amp to use in small clubs? You've got some great options. If you are short on cash, you'll want a versatile amp, one that can get great tones at lower volumes, but still holds its own in larger clubs. If you have a bit more cash, you could end up with two or three (or more) amps in your tool kit, enabling you to size the amp to different rooms.

For those of you seeking natural tube distortion, you'll want to select an amp that can be run fairly wide open in a typical setting for your band. If you've ever tried to achieve saturated, overdriven tone in a small room with a Twin Reverb, for example, you probably found that your sound was lacking the full, rich tones that Twins are famous for. That's because you were limited to turning the volume no higher than "3" without your eardrums bleeding. On a big amp such as a Twin, tone will really improve at about "6" or "7" on the volume control, but by then the club owner will have told you to pack it up!

For this article, I'll concentrate on amps that I dearly love for their exceptional overdriven sound at comparatively low volumes. Don't worry, we'll cover the big boys for you soon in a future issue.

The Versatile Fender Vibrolux Reverb

The Fender Vibrolux Reverb is one of my personal favorites (Blackface in this case—circa 1965 through 1967—but a converted Silverface model will work the same). If I had to recommend just one amp to a player, this would be the one. First, it's 35 friendly watts (two 6L6 power tubes). That's plenty of power to produce great lows and low mids when you need them. Second, it has a 5AR4 rectifier tube, which provides adequate sag and natural compression to help give you a nice hard attack and improve overall sustain. Third, it has two decent sized 10" speakers, which are desirable for two reasons; you'll love the crunch of 10" speakers at higher volumes, and you'll be pushing more air with two speakers, providing more headroom than a single 12", while not moving the volume of air as a much louder Super Reverb with four 10"s. Some claim that the output transformer in a Vibrolux Reverb is a bit wimpy, and to a point that is true; however for smaller gigs, what makes the bottom end sometimes seem a little loose also makes your highs and leads sing brilliantly. So there is a trade off, but the overall sound of a stock blackface Vibrolux Reverb is outstanding. Your tone will also benefit from having a great pair of speakers in this amp (a subject for later articles). I find Jensen C10Ns in particular, to be excellent.

Crank It!

The key to great tone at a show is to run your amp fairly full to bring the most out of it. To me, a Fender doesn't begin to find its voice until just past "5", into the "6" range on the volume control. I also run the treble fairly high, the bass somewhat high as well, with reverb on about "3" or so, and the "bright" switch off. I prefer the "effects" or second channel because I love the sound of Fender reverb, but I also use the second channel since it has one more stage of gain in the pre-amp. And remember, that's where all of your tone and harmonics are defined. The harder you hit the power section with a hot signal, the better the harmonics and tone will be. The Vibrolux Reverb will certainly take you where you want to go in the search for tone, but, I repeat, you'll have to run it at "5" or higher, and try boosting those highs and lows with your treble and bass controls. Doing so adds a lot. At louder volumes, you may notice a bit of looseness in the bottom end. That's characteristic of these amps and it's related to the size of the output transformer, but it's still a very versatile amp.

Other advantages of the Vibrolux Reverb are that it's comparatively light, small, fits into your car easily and it won't break your back hauling it around. If you want to own just one Fender Blackface amp, this is the one to have.

The Venerable Blackface Deluxe Reverb

An equally fine choice for a versatile small club amp is the Vibrolux Reverb's little brother, the Blackface Deluxe Reverb (1964 through 1967, but again, a converted Silverface model will yield the same results). It is rated at just 24 watts or so (with two 6V6 power tubes), but the overall circuitry in the amp is virtually the same as the Vibrolux Reverb. It has two channels, but I only use the second channel, again, due to the extra stage of gain. It drives a single 12" speaker. Most of the Deluxe Reverbs that Fender built have a very inefficient Oxford 12" in them.

The first thing you should do to make this amp really worthy is to install a much larger ceramic magnet speaker. A better 12" is essential to having a Deluxe sound as good as it possibly can (and that is very good indeed.) The Deluxe Reverb will not have as

much bottom as a Vibrolux Reverb, due to it's smaller power tubes, but anyone who's heard a Deluxe Reverb set at about "6" for leads knows how sweet the 6V6 power tubes sound. Again, you need to run this amp at "6" or above in terms of volume to really bring out the classic overdriven Fender tone. I find that setting my guitar's volume knob on "10" for leads works wonderfully, then when I back it off to say "7" or so for rhythm, the amp naturally cleans up. That's a neat trick to use. If you are hesitant to change your original speaker, consider acquiring a second speaker cabinet for your new and improved speaker. But remember, amps are tone machines, not museum pieces, so if you are torn between swapping out the speaker, keep in mind that you can always store it away and reinstall it if you decide to sell the amp later. I have an extension cabinet with a 15" Electrovoice SRO speaker in it, and I sometimes run my own Deluxe Reverb through that setup. It dramatically improves the tone—huge fat bottom, low mids, and much more overall volume. Try that and you'll be glad that you did. A reminder, all amps should be in top operating condition—that means fresh tubes, capacitors, and the proper bias set on your power tubes for killer tone!

You get the same portable benefits from this amp that you do with the Vibrolux Reverb . . . small size, easy to tote, and fits in a car easily.

Blackface Princeton Reverb—A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

My choice for the third amp recommended for small clubs may surprise you—the Blackface Princeton Reverb (1964 through 1967, but once more, a converted Silverface will yield the same results). Yes, you heard me right, a Princeton Reverb! Hey, that's a practice amp you say, and you're right, PRs are not widely recognized as gigging amps. However, under the right conditions, this amp will work extremely well in a small room. Like the Deluxe Reverb, Princetons were equipped with an inefficient 10" speaker. Same thing goes with this as with the Deluxe Reverb's original speaker. Remove it and install a bigger, more efficient 10", or even better by far, get a 12" Jensen reissue or other efficient speaker with a ceramic magnet. Installing a 12" will involve cutting a new baffle board from three-quarter inch plywood, transferring the original grill cloth and saving the original baffleboard just in case you ever want to sell the amp. But believe me when I tell you the extra work and expense are definitely worth it. An efficient 12" speaker in a properly biased and maintained Princeton will change your tone—lovin' life forever.

Still another option for the Princeton is to use a second cabinet with a larger speaker. My 15" SRO sounds incredibly fine with this amp.

Princeton Voodoo

Now if you really want the best tone from a Princeton, the following modifications will lead you to guaranteed Tone Nirvana.

Princeton Reverbs differ from the other two amps we've covered in several respects. There is only one channel, the tremelo functions differently, the phase inverter is unique, and there happens to be a slight inherent mismatch in the phase inverter. Match that up, and while you are at it, blueprint the entire power section by matching all of the components perfectly, using the highest quality parts. Also add two 470 ohm resistors to the screen grids of the 6V6 power tubes, which was a customary practice in all of the bigger Fender amps. Having made these modifications, you will come unglued with the overall sound of your new and improved Princeton Reverb. This slightly modified amp will be virtually twice as loud, way fuller, with significantly fatter tones overall. Couple it with a better speaker and you'll have an amp that screams unlike any Princeton or Deluxe you've ever heard. I recently sat-in with a band using one of my blackface Princeton Reverbs that has a 12" speaker installed and the recommended "blueprinting". I easily held my own on stage with a Hammond B-3 with a Leslie 145, a bass player, and drummer, with the Princeton's volume set at about "8". Prior to the show, I heard a few snickers that my "little" Princeton would be swallowed up by the rest of the band. At least 10 people approached me afterwards and asked where my big amp was, since I sure couldn't be getting that great tone out of a Princeton. Imagine their surprise when I showed them the cord between my old Strat and the Princeton (with no stomp boxes). They couldn't believe it.

A Princeton Reverb is definitely well suited for a small club gig, but it needs a little help. Don't be afraid to coax more tone out of any amp. You can always put things back to their original stock condition if you choose, but I find that slight enhancements make for tremendous improvements in tone without turning amps into shread machines. And portability? It gets no better than a Princeton Reverb!

I've used every one of the amps mentioned here many times at hundreds of gigs over the years. I size the amp to the club and go from there, but lighter is the way to go in my opinion. If you've ever hauled equipment around with a band, you know what I mean all too well. Plus the smaller amps provide you with a much more usable tone at a lower volume, something that the audience and the club owners will appreciate!

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