

# Letters from America

Touring guitarist turned amp builder Todd Sharp is responsible for the JOAT series of highly original designs. **DAVE HUNTER** plugs into the 45RT



## DAVE HUNTER

Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of numerous books including *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*.

If you want to check out the pedigree of a guy who knows tone, just dip into Todd Sharp's CV: not only has he been one of Nashville's premier amp techs for years, but before that he was a top-flight studio and touring guitarist, supporting the likes of Rod Stewart, Christine McVie, Delbert McCClinton, Hall & Oates, Bob Welch and Mick Fleetwood. During his playing career, Sharp owned not one but two legendary Dumble amps, rare creations built to his own specifications by the fabled Alexander, while also favouring vintage AC30s and other delectable creations.

Even before he started making a living from touring, Sharp knew a thing or two about what was going on inside these sonic wonders. Having been an electronics enthusiast as a child, he built his first valve radio transmitter at the age of seven. Yes, seven. The necessity of keeping Sharp's AC30 on the road maintained his solder skills ("The damn thing blew up so often, I had to fix it every third time I turned it on"), and once he'd had enough of the road in 1994 he founded Nashville Amplifier Service, which has been going great guns ever since.

A couple of years ago, after servicing and modifying the rarified amps of the stars for two decades, Sharp decided to put his compiled

thoughts and theories on great valve tone into a design of his own, the JOAT (Jack Of All Tone).

## Meet the family

The club-sized JOAT 20RT was the first out of the door, with the extremely original Sharp preamp design coupled with a 2x EL84 output stage. More recently, Sharp has delivered the JOAT 30RT (an unusual 2x 6V6 + 2x EL84 concoction, used by Keith Urban), and the JOAT 45RT – which we have here. The big boy of the range, this one is powered by a pair of EL34s, but also configurable for KT66 or 6L6 output valves. AC-to-DC rectification comes from a GZ34. The RT stands for 'reverb and tremolo', both of which are far from the common mould.

The great bulk of the JOAT's impressive originality happens, though, in its front end, where Sharp taps a 6AU6 pentode preamp valve (and an American-made NOS example at that) in an entirely unique circuit, which has no standard EQ controls but gives you three rotary switches to sculpt your voice.

As Sharp puts it: "It's all tone, but you can take some away if you like." To wit, a five-position Attitude switch takes you from

tame to tirade, with subtle frequency shifts along the way; a six-position Low Cut knob dials back the bass; and a six-position High Cut control does likewise for treble. Dual inputs give you high- and low-sensitivity options, and a three-way Bite switch brings more edge and sting from the upper-mids, when desired.

The reverb circuit is driven by an EL84, and boasts knobs for Drive, Tone and Level – which govern a complex dual-tank system. The valve-driven opto tremolo offers the usual Speed and Depth. Round the back, the JOAT 45RT carries dual speaker outs with a switch for 4/8/16 ohms, a switch to select maximum or reduced headroom and a 0/180° relative phase switch to align the amp with other amps or cabs. Inside, workmanship and components are all first-rate. Sharp uses hefty ohmite power resistors, along with one-watt carbon comps, F&T filter caps, expensive mil-spec PEC potentiometers and at least six different makes of signal capacitors – that I can see. That first pentode valve and the dual spring tanks are both on aircraft-grade isolation mounts, custom-spec transformers come from Magnetics Components and Mercury

Magnetics, and 19-strand Teflon-coated mil-spec wire pulls it all together. Yet there's also an appealingly

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## KEY FEATURES

### Todd Sharp JOAT 45RT head

- **PRICE** £3,199 (approx, excluding shipping, VAT and other duties)
- **CONTROLS** Preamp: Volume, Bite, Attitude, Low Cut, High Cut controls. Reverb: Drive, Tone, Level (with pull-switch for Bright). Tremolo: Speed, Depth
- **OUTPUT** 45 watts
- **VALVES** 1x 6AU6 and 3x 12AX7 preamp tubes, 1x EL84 reverb driver, 2x EL34 output tubes, 1x EL34 rectifier
- **FEATURES** 4-, 8- and 16-ohm outputs; headroom switch; relative phase switch; two-button footswitch for reverb and tremolo
- **DIMENSIONS** 635x266x298mm
- **WEIGHT** 56lbs/25.4kg
- **CONTACT** toddsharpamps.com



'high-end-homebrew' element to the build, which leaves me thinking, 'Yeah, someone actually made this... and it probably sounds extremely cool'.

And it does. I tested the JOAT 45RT through a TopHat 2x12 cab with one Celestion Alnico Cream (Sharp's preference for this amp) and one early-80s Celestion G12-65. I also ran it through a StoneAge 1x12 with a late-60s EV SRO alnico 12-inch speaker, using a Gibson 1959 Les Paul Reissue, a '57 Telecaster and a Scott Heatley Parisienne, into which I've loaded a nifty pair of 1959 Gibson P-90s.

It's worth noting right off the bat that, although this amp lacks conventional tone controls, its clever switches offer a boatload of sound-shaping possibilities; and while this is a vintage-leaning design with no master volume, it beautifully runs the gamut from lush, shimmering cleans to rich, throaty overdrive.

Note, too, that influence-wise, despite Sharp being a former Dumble owner, there's little of that style of amp in here, other than in the JOAT's aspirations to stellar purity of tone and exalted 'player's amp' status. There are, however – although it is achieved very differently – several aural nods to the great Vox AC30s of the early-to-mid 60s, and both the very first renditions of the model and the longer-running iterations of the AC15, which carried a juicy EF86 preamp valve for a similar vibe.

## Clear and present

The 6AU6 pentode valve lends a thick, plummy character, but the amp doesn't lack clarity and sparkle. Everything from clean to mean is couched in delectably pillowy harmonic depths, yet individual notes ring out, even within advanced overdrive settings. It's a very enjoyable and inspiring amp to play. While not aping any specific Marshall, Vox or Fender tweed, the JOAT 45RT eats up classic rock, but its heightened dynamics and the way it urges you to dig deep make it an extremely malleable modern lead player's tone tool.

I don't think you'll find a better amp-based reverb, either, and once you get the very appealing tremolo throbbing along within that plush, über-dimensional wash, it's a retro soundscape or swamp-rocker's dream. It will come as no surprise that the JOAT 45RT is loud, too, packing more volume than many gigs will allow today, and with no onboard means of dialling it down when you reach full-on-overdrive levels. It sounded great tamed through



my Fryette Power Station, though, and was also superb played through a Two Notes Torpedo Live into my studio monitors, its sonic breadth and sweet touch sensitivity suffering little through either form of attenuation. Smaller gigs are

where the original JOAT 20RT comes into play.

The JOAT won't be for nu-metal heads – although it does take overdrive pedals very well – and if you 'need' an effects loop, well, you won't find one here. Be aware of this, too: the JOAT is big and heavy. Did I slip a disc carrying it around the studio? Maybe, we're still waiting for the X-rays. But this is a professional, touring-grade amplifier that delivers mightily, and plenty of discerning players will be willing to lump it. I can't say I've sweated through a more pleasantly addictive amp in quite some time. 🎸

