



# Loud & Clear

633? The only number you need to know for great tone? These two new amps from one of the UK's finest makers prove it's certainly one...

Words: Nick Guppy | Photography: Joseph Branton



# 633 ENGINEERING DRIVE KING 50 HEAD & JAZZ & BLUES 1X12 COMBO £3175 & £3100

CONTACT 633 Engineering PHONE 01788 822289 WEB [www.633amp.com](http://www.633amp.com)

## What You Need To Know

- 1 Who is 633 Engineering?**  
633 is amp builder Cliff Brown, formerly chief designer for Blackstar Amplification and, before that, chief designer for mixing-desk supremos, Soundcraft. Away from his lab and workbench, Cliff is also an accomplished guitarist and travels all over the country fronting the Cliff Brown Band.
- 2 What's makes 633 amps different?**  
The exceptional build quality and craftsmanship, as well as superlative tone from simple control layouts. Every 633 customer benefits from Cliff's years and ears, with the opportunity to have their amp tweaked by Cliff to match their personal requirements.
- 3 What type of players are they aimed at?**  
Professionals and dedicated amateurs who want the very best and are prepared to pay for it. 633's are best-suited for experienced players who cross over between blues, jazz, classic rock and country styles and understand how to drive an amp from the guitar, although they take pedals really well too.

It's been a busy year for 633 founder and chief designer, Cliff Brown. He's moved 633 into a new factory, developed new models, and fulfilled a growing order book, all while continuing a second burgeoning musical career fronting his own band. However, 633 Amplification continues to be Cliff's main focus and this month we're shaking down the two latest designs to taxi out onto the runway, the Drive King 50 head and the Jazz & Blues combo.

The Drive King 50 is a new addition to 633's more-or-less standard range, given that every new build can be significantly customised to suit its owner. Meanwhile the Jazz & Blues combo is a better example of 633's bespoke work – taking a customer's demands and turning them into a product that meets, if not exceeds, all expectation.

Visually, the Drive King 50 is pure 633, looking a little meaner in all-black vinyl, but still with the same illuminated badge.





1. The two-button footswitch effects loop has two pre-set levels for rack and stompbox effects

2. 633's Headroom feature progressively raises or lowers the amp's output in five steps, going from 8 watts to 15, 22, 32 and 50 watts

3. The three-position voice switch adds more flexibility in Drive mode, emphasising highs or mids, with a centre off position

A closer look at the controls reveals a similar layout to the Dumble ODS and its many clones, with volume, high, mid and low controls joined by an overdrive section with separate drive and level knobs. There's a three-position voice switch that emphasises mids or highs in Drive mode, together with a level control for digital reverb. On the right is a global master volume and 633's trademark headroom control, with five settings that progress from around 8 watts up to the amp's full output of 50 watts.

The simple back panel has a pair of speaker outlets with an impedance switch and a series effects loop with a bypass switch and a choice of two trimmable levels for rack and stompbox effects. There's also a locking XLR socket for the Drive King's two-button footswitch, which changes channels and toggles the effects loop.

Build and parts quality are exceptional, with the weight of a substantial pair of Hammond transformers offset by the aluminium chassis, which helps keep the Drive King head portable, as well as offering superior grounding. The 633's internals look more like those of a high-end recording desk, which isn't surprising as Cliff was chief design engineer for Soundcraft in a previous incarnation. Overall, high performance meets solid reliability, and the head looks the part on top of its specially designed open-back cabinet, which houses a quartet of Celestion G10N-40 speakers.

The single-channel Jazz & Blues combo was originally developed for American

As is typical of 633 the build quality is exceptional and the parts first class





4. The Jazz & Blues is a straightforward single-channel design
5. The simple rear has speaker outlets and an impedance switch
6. The controls help achieve superb clarity
7. The brown motif is based on early 60s Fender amps
8. The loop was specially designed to allow the use of pedals without affecting tone



blues supremo Kirk Fletcher, and includes controls for volume, highs, mids, lows, reverb and presence, together with a bright toggle switch and headroom rotary headroom switch. The combo's cosmetics are none more brown, with rough Tolex harmonising with the engraved control panel and knobs. On the rear panel, there's a pair of speaker outlets with an impedance switch, and a pair of send and return jacks for the effects loop. This isn't the standard kind of loop that sits in between pre and power amp sections, instead it sits right at the front of the amplifier, behind a unity gain buffer stage. This lets you use pedals that wouldn't normally sit in a loop, like wahs and overdrives, without affecting the guitar's tone. The loop is footswitchable and the footswitch incorporates a power outlet as well as a remote EQ switch, letting you tweak the EQ when the loop is activated.

While the Drive King uses 6L6GC's, the Jazz & Blues is equipped with a pair of 5881s, driving a single Celestion Alnico Gold 12" loudspeaker. The 5881 valve was originally developed in the USA by the famous Tung-Sol company of Newark, NJ, as an upgrade to the contemporary 6L6WGB; it was standard equipment in Fender's higher-powered tweed amps from the 1950s, prior to the arrival of the more powerful 6L6WGC in 1959. Like the Drive King, the Jazz & Blues is built to an exceptionally high standard inside and out, using similar construction methods.

### Sounds

As with the Californian design that inspired it, the Drive King 50 isn't an instant-gratification amp. Because the clean volume control cascades into the drive section, you need to determine the most useful

overall balance between clean and drive levels. On other D-style amps we've used, we tend towards slightly distorted cleans, which can be tamed by backing off on the guitar's volume control. It's common for the optimal gain window in such amps to be quite small, however, the Drive King's range is very wide, going from sweet, almost clean Carlton-esque tones to the more characteristic D-style midrange squawk of Robben Ford and Matt Schofield, all the way to a respectable scooped thrash that will flatter any detuned or baritone guitar. However, it's in the low-to-medium gain ranges that the Drive King really excels, focusing the guitar's character and reproducing it with unparalleled clarity. This is 633's sonic calling-card – a multi-dimensional tip of the hat to tweed Fender and Dartford Vox, combined with extended highs that remain sweet and balanced,



unearthly sustain and a player-friendly dynamic response that flatters any guitar plugged into it. On some boutique designs, it's common for every tiny mistake to be magnified, forcing the user into an all-or-nothing approach to every note and chord. However, the 633's addictive dynamic response smooths out imperfections, putting the music first and making the whole playing experience rewarding and great fun. Special effects, such as pinched harmonics, double stop bends, scrapes and slides are almost too easy to pull off and sound totally musical.

The Jazz & Blues combo sits in more traditional vintage Fender territory, with a tone that can shift from tweed to blackface, depending on midrange. The clever front-end loop takes drive pedals well, with little or no extra noise and the remote EQ switch restores tone that effects in the

loop can remove. We liked its no-nonsense controls; there's no master volume, so the headroom switch needs to be balanced with the volume control to achieve the right amount of clarity. Used with a band, we found that the second switch stop (15 watts) was more than enough for our needs, leaving plenty of headroom for bigger cleans if needed. On both amps, the superb digital reverb rounds out the sound for a truly professional result, saving you the cost of at least one effects pedal.

633 has produced two superb new designs that could be the amps of your dreams

### Verdict

It's been practically impossible to find fault with any 633 we've tried, and this pair is no different. They blend a range and clarity that we haven't experienced on any other amp, with superb player-friendly dynamics.

On the thorny subject of price, it's important to keep things in context. Firstly, the parts cost of a 633 amplifier has already increased by around £200 post-Brexit, and is set to continue rising. We've tried all the popular boutique D-style amps, which mostly have similar price tags, including one that was over double the price.

The competition doesn't even come close, simply because the Drive King 50 is in a class of its own, yet costs no more than an entry-level Custom Shop Gibson or Fender. We think the Drive King's sublime tone, exceptional performance and build quality more than justify the price, and our top



9



10

9. The single Celestion Alnico Gold 12" loudspeaker gives the Jazz & Blues a vintage Fender quality

10. This switch for the Jazz & Blues combo's cooling fan, is one of several optional extras and ideal if an amp spends most of its time on hot stages with no air circulation

award. We think it raises the bar for this amplification genre.

The Jazz & Blues combo does what it says on the can. It's perfect for jazz, blues and a lot more – an ideal partner for the keep-it-simple guitarist who wants a backseat grab-and-go combo. It's also expensive, but it's in the same ballpark as some of its closest competitors. It's built in the UK and unlike the competition, you can talk directly to the designer and vary its spec to suit your own personal needs. For either of these two, the result should mean it's the last amp you'll ever buy.

At the apex of pro-guitar amplification, we're spoiled for choice with an ever-increasing list of boutique brands covering everything from simple vintage replicas to modern multi-channel versatility. In this crowd, an amp has to be really special to stand out – 633 have produced two more superb designs that take on the best there is and send most of them packing. If you're in the market, our advice is don't delay. With short odds on more Brexit-related austerity, there'll probably never be a better time to buy the amp of your dreams. **G**



### 633 ENGINEERING DRIVE KING 50 HEAD

**PRICE:** £3,175 (inc two-button foot switch and cover)

**ORIGIN:** UK

**TYPE:** All-valve head with digital reverb

**OUTPUT:** 50 watts

**VALVES:** 4 x 12AX7, 2 x 6L6WGC

**DIMENSIONS:** 231 (h) x 515 (w) x 214mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 15/33

**CABINET:** Birch ply

**CHANNELS:** One, with footswitchable overdrive

**CONTROLS:** Volume, highs, mids, lows, drive, drive level, reverb level, master volume, headroom. Three-position voice switch in drive mode boosts highs/mids/normal

**FOOTSWITCH:** Two-button switch toggles drive mode, effects loop

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** High quality digital reverb, footswitchable effects loop with variable send level

**OPTIONS:** A non-reverb model costs £2,935, including footswitch and cover. Various circuit and finish options are available, contact manufacturer for details

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Drive King 4x10 cabinet is specially developed for the head and costs £830



10/10

**PROS** Unreal tone and sustain, with greatly expanded range for this type of amp. It's simply one of the best heads we've ever plugged into

**CONS** It's expensive, but you get what you pay for... and then some



### 633 ENGINEERING JAZZ & BLUES 1X12 COMBO

**PRICE:** £3100 (inc footswitch and cover)

**ORIGIN:** UK

**TYPE:** All-valve combo with digital reverb

**OUTPUT:** 45 watts

**VALVES:** 4 x 12AX7, 2 x 5881

**DIMENSIONS:** 480 (h) x 650 (w) x 250mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 23/49

**CABINET:** Birch ply

**CHANNELS:** One, with footswitchable effects loop

**CONTROLS:** Volume, highs, mids, lows, reverb level, presence, 5-way headroom rotary switch. Bright switch

**FOOTSWITCH:** Single-button switch toggles effects loop

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** High quality digital reverb, footswitchable effects loop with remote EQ function and remote DC pedal power feed

**OPTIONS:** Various circuit and finish options are available, contact manufacturer for details

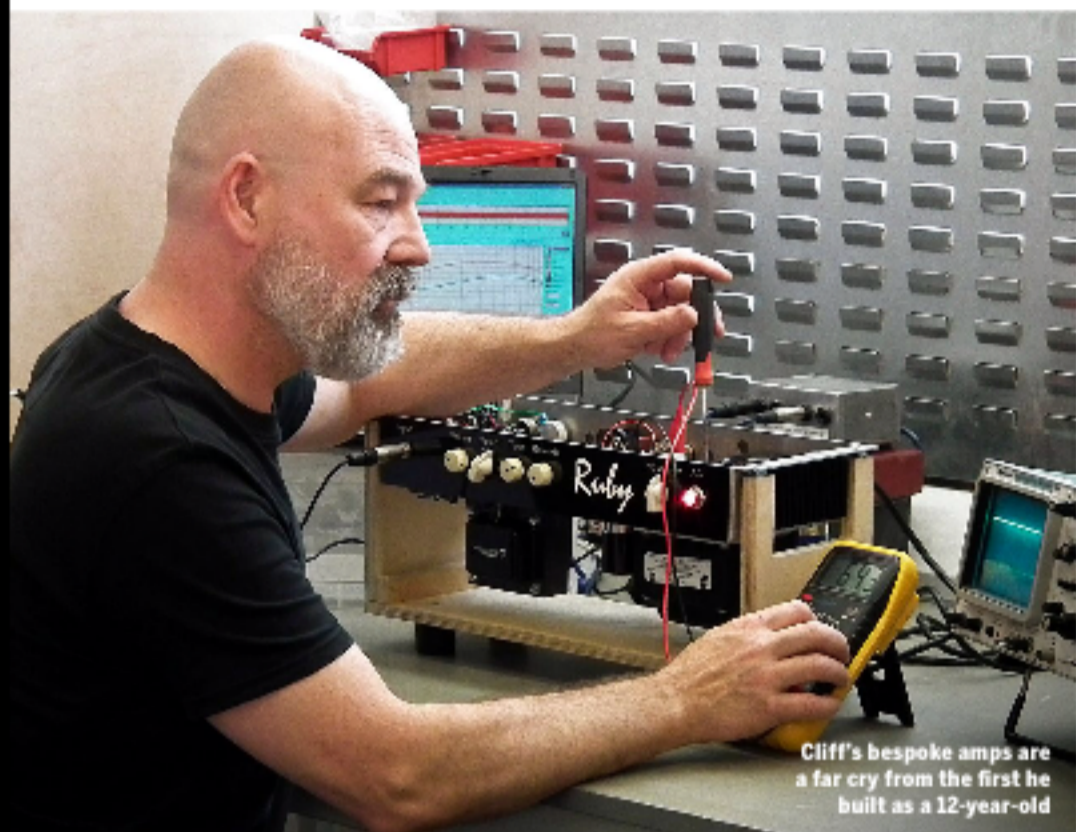
**RANGE OPTIONS:** None



9/10

**PROS** Huge Fender-inspired vintage tones, with spine-tingling reverb

**CONS** It is expensive (though you certainly get your money's worth); quite hefty for a 1x12



Cliff's bespoke amps are a far cry from the first he built as a 12-year-old



Cliff on stage with his self-built Telecaster

## Cliff Brown

633 Engineering's main man tells us about the appeal of his bespoke amps and his approach to getting the perfect tone

### Tell us about the new Drive King 50.

I started the Drive King project two years after playing through various D-type clone amps. I was curious why the cascaded gain topology appeals to many guitarists. There were qualities I liked and some I didn't but that I thought could be fixed. In this type of amp the tone stack precedes the switchable drive section, so there's often a compromise. I was interested to see if I could improve this. I think it's one of the most satisfying design journeys I've been on; the amp can do so many things with a simple feature set.

### And how about the Jazz & Blues?

The combo was built for Kirk Fletcher to use at the Bristol Jazz & Blues festival in February. I figured we would be running between different locations, so it was built as a reasonably lightweight 1x12 combo, with a nod to the 60s Fender 'Brownface' amps Kirk is fond of. The front-end loop was something I'd been thinking about for a while, as I've always been disappointed with pedalboards killing my tone.

### When did you build your first amp and why?

It was 1977, I was 12. I'd auditioned for a 40s-style big band on guitar and got the gig, but they didn't have a bass player and my dad said bass was more important. So, I built a guitar and bass head using a solid-state ILP HY120 power amp module and a preamp complete with fuzz, using Veroboard. I tried my best to make it look

like a Carlsbro Stingray or HH Musician. That was my first rig and it got used pretty much every weekend for around four years. It never let me down other than when the cab fell over and the weight of the speaker ripped out the screws holding the baffle to the rest of the cab. After that I used bolts!

### What makes 633 amps unique?

Firstly, every 633 amp is bespoke, developed from a dialogue with the customer. This isn't just cosmetics – the feature set, switching options, the voicing and response of the amp and the customer's playing style, guitars and pickups are all considered. Secondly, they're designed to last, with a very high level of attention to detail and hours of testing at proper volume levels.

### Which notable players are using 633 amps?

American blues giant Kirk Fletcher, James Litherland of Colosseum fame, the legendary Micky Moody, Ash Wilson and session player/side man Stuart Dixon.

### What are your favourite recorded amp/guitar examples of great tone and why?

Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* (disc 1 track 4) *Voodoo Chile*, blew my mind when I first heard it. What a huge guitar sound, amazing reverb. That hammer-on at the start is haunting. Larry Carlton with The Crusaders on *Those Southern Knights*. A beautiful example of a lead tone produced by an amp just breaking up.

### What's your best amp tone tip?

Start at the source. Getting your guitar's nut, bridge and frets cut and profiled properly will have a massive impact. These parts of the guitar define the note's attack. A good lead, decent strings and lower output pickups coupled with an amp turned up enough to drive the power tubes will help produce a very musical, singing clean tone. When the amp is working like this, the tone controls define the amp's dynamic response rather than acting as filters.

### What exciting 633 products are coming?

I've had several requests for a 633 amp-in-a-small-box and for a drive pedal. I may combine both and provide something with a bit of a twist. I'm also developing a couple of interfacing gadgets, which may prove to be useful additions to many players' rigs.

### What's your rig with the Cliff Brown Band?

My prototype Drive King head and either a 1x12 open-back cab with a Celestion G12-80 or a 4x10 open-backed cab with G10N-40s. For trio gigs, I have a pedalboard with a Boss OC2 octave down and a couple of delay. If I play a different set with a Hammond or second guitarist, I go straight into the amp with no effects, or use just a drive pedal. Guitars are usually my self-built 'Tele' with Fender Nocaster pickups, a gold-top Les Paul with mini humbuckers and a Korean-made Epiphone Joe Pass archtop.

[www.633amp.com](http://www.633amp.com)