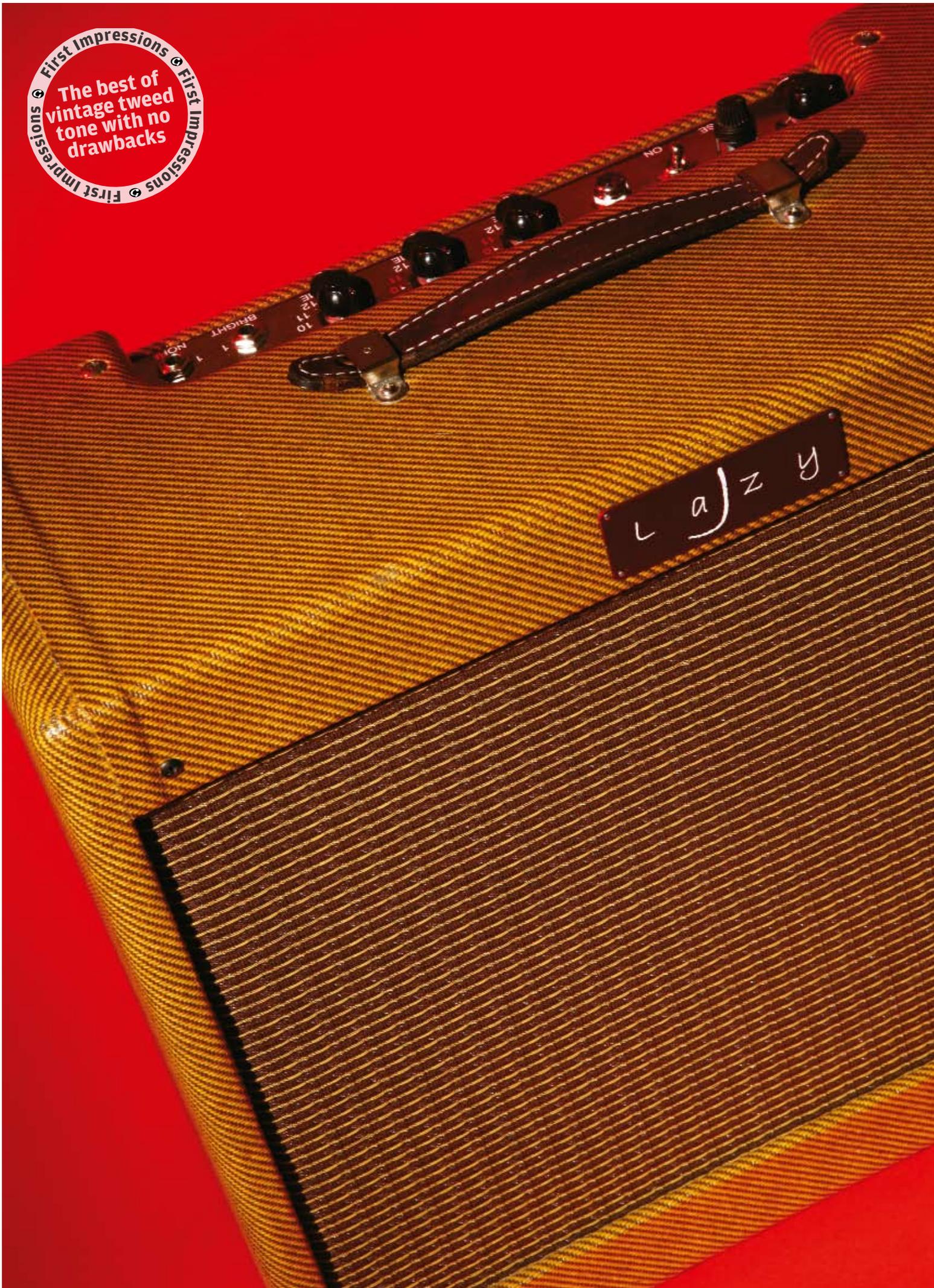


First Impressions
The best of vintage tweed tone with no drawbacks
First Impressions



Beefed-up Fender tweed Deluxes have been responsible for some of the most volcanic sounds in rock, and now an American in London is doing it his way. Review by Huw Price

Lazy J

20 Combo

Jesse Hoff, the man behind Lazy J, never set out to reinvent the wheel – but there must be something special about these amps, because they've found their way into the rigs of the artist formerly known as 'god', Doyle Bramhall II and noted vintage nut Phil Harris. Hoff has been a guitarist for decades and, like many players, he developed an interest in maintaining and modifying vintage amps. Eventually, he gained enough experience and expertise to become a pro amp tech. When he bought a late '50s 5E3 Fender Deluxe he decided to turn it into the best amp it could possibly be, but soon he hit a point where further work would entail irreversible modifications to this much-loved vintage piece, so he decided to build his own instead. It turned out so well that others started placing orders. Before long Hoff had an amp business on his hands in addition to his regular amp tech gig at Chandler Guitars in Kew.

Hoff's 5E3 enhancements include extra volume, tighter lows, more clean headroom, mid boost switching, a built-in attenuator and valve-driven spring reverb. Arguably the most significant factor is the selection of a Celestion Blue; none of the original-spec P12 Jensens are particularly efficient and they generally display a ratty and loose low end with a honky midrange – a very cool sound which contributes enormously to the classic tweed tone, but which does limit you. The Celestion Blue is one of the most efficient speakers – and efficiency increases the volume level, which in turn provides more clean headroom.

The power hike is achieved using 6L6 power tubes, a 5AR4 rectifier tube and a beefed-up output transformer. This raises the output from around 12W (depending on who's counting) to 20W. The 6L6s can be swapped out for Deluxe-spec 6V6s, and you can put in a 5Y3 rectifier for more traditional lower-wattage Deluxe tone. Conversely, you can plug the Lazy J 20 into a matching Lazy J extension cabinet if you want more volume.



Enhancements include extra volume, tighter lows, more clean headroom, a mid boost, an attenuator and reverb

Plenty of later blackface and silverface Deluxe Reverbs were modded to approximate that tweed sound, so why not add reverb to a tweed amp? An Accutronics spring reverb tank sits at the bottom of the cab, and the circuitry is housed in a metal enclosure screwed to one side. Two valves and a transformer protrude from this box, and there are controls for Reverb and Reverb Tone with a socket for the footswitch.

Tweed Deluxe-style control panels are simple: two channels, Bright and Normal, each with high and low level inputs and a Volume knob, and a treble-cutting Tone control that doubles as a push/pull mid boost. The redundant ground switch hole accommodates a power attenuation control. This is a continually variable voltage regulator; turned fully clockwise, it's switched out of circuit.

The electronic construction is done on vintage-style eyelet board with a mixture

of Sprague and Mojo Dijon capacitors. Hoff offers a bespoke service and prefers to talk to customers at length to determine the style of music and type of tone they prefer. From there, he will select components to achieve the desired result. Players who prefer a brighter and clearer tone will be steered towards carbon film resistors rather than the darker and fuzzier carbon composite type; customers can even request tremolo and select their own speakers, or they can opt not to have reverb or attenuation.

It's hard to assess the quality of the electronic construction as this amp is an early and much-modded example built to a customer's exact specifications. It's certainly tidy and workmanlike, but Hoff assured us that current production amps feature a much cleaner level of build. We have no reason to doubt this, especially after examining Hoff's high-quality finger-jointed pine cabinet. The immaculate

FACTFILE

LAZY J 20

Specs: 20W 1x12" combo with 12AV7, 12AT7, 2 x 12AX7s, 2 x 6L6 and 5AR4 valves. Made in the UK

Controls: Tone, Ch1 Volume, Ch2 Volume, Reverb Level, Reverb Tone/mid boost switch, Attenuator

Price: Basic amp, £1249; with attenuator, £1349; as reviewed, £1599

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Only one tone control, but the volume controls are interactive. Each will affect the tone and tightness when you're plugged into the other channel

THE COMPETITION

VICTORIA Double Deluxe
Four cathode-biased 6V6s pump up the power to 30 or 40W with either a 5Y3 or 5AR4 rectifier. Comes with two Jensen P12Q speakers
RRP: £1999

FENDER '57 Deluxe
This is Fender's own long-overdue handwired tweed Deluxe reissue. Issued with a Jensen P12Q speaker and a non-original 12AX7 front end
RRP: £1449

SEELEY Tweedle D
Alan Seeley makes tweed Deluxe clones and customised versions right here in the UK using selected components and valves plus your preferred speaker
RRP: From £1500

tweed covering is about as good as it gets, and the coat of brown-tinted lacquer makes the Lazy J 20 look as if it's been marinating in nicotine since 1957.

SOUNDS

Tweed Deluxe volume controls had to go up to 12, because the first two increments don't work. The Lazy J is just the same: it abruptly wakes up somewhere between 2 and 3. By 4 overdrive is quite apparent, although you do get a touch more clean headroom through Input 2. There's no shortage of chimey treble for country twang or stinging, wiry blues sounds, and you can roll back the Tone control for a woodier, smoothed-over sound. What else can it do? Well, what can't it



Though supplied with 6L6s, the Lazy J will take 6V6s and a rectifier swap from GZ34 to 5Y3 without rebiasing

The Lazy J can sound like a fire-breathing monster, but turn your guitar down and you'll get a sweet, sparkly clean tone

do: it certainly does blues, country, slide, heavy rock and jazz. It can even be loud and clean if you use the second volume control like Neil Young (who also favours a 6L6-loaded tweed Deluxe). Try maxing out the volume control on whichever channel you're plugged into, then turn up the other volume until it hits the point where the output starts to cut out. With your guitar volume full, the Lazy J will sound like a fire-breathing rock monster. You can turn your guitar down a notch or just play softer, and you'll have the most sweet, sparkly clean tone you can imagine with hardly any drop in volume. With the Lazy J extension cabinet plugged in, this proved easily loud enough to use alongside a drummer.

The reverb integrates superbly with the overall tone, adding just a hint of hanging tail or a big ambience. It never dominates or swamps the dry sound, and the reverb tone control is a welcome extra feature. However, the reverb does get slightly overshadowed at higher gain levels.

I preferred my single coil guitars with the Lazy J's mid boost engaged, but they're twangtastic without it too. For home use or jamming with an acoustic, the attenuator did a fine job without altering the spookily responsive playing dynamics or the nature of the overdrive.

VERDICT

Regular readers might have noted that my main amp is a '51 Fender Deluxe. After much experimentation, I've finally settled on a Celestion Blue with a GZ34 rectifier. I tend to play with a reverb pedal, and lately I've been thinking about attenuators because the amp is too loud to crank up at home. I mention all this so you'll understand why I'm so enthusiastic about the Lazy J 20. Despite the paucity of controls, this deceptively versatile amp can be pretty much anything you'd want it to be. It retains everything that's great about vintage tweed Deluxes, but there's no honky boxiness and it's a clearer, louder and infinitely more usable amp for modern applications. This could be the ultimate 5E3-inspired combo – and I really can't fault it. 🔄

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality	19/20
Versatility	18/20
Sound	20/20
Value for money	20/20
Vibe	20/20

TOTAL **97%**

Good for... Pretty much anything except drop tuned death metal
Look elsewhere... For large gig volume levels