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You'd be forgiven for thinking that the last thing we need is yet another boutique tweed amp. However, a client list that includes Pete Townsend, Dave Gilmour, Joe Bonamassa, Mike Campbell, Joe Walsh, and Mark Knopfler suggests there must be something special about Lazy J.

In 1992 company founder Jesse Hoff experienced an epiphany when he found a 1950s Fender Deluxe in a South Carolina pawnshop. Already an experienced amp tech, Hoff began fine-tuning his 5E3 to achieve the tone, headroom and dynamic response he needed. Eventually Hoff built one from scratch with a 6L6 output stage, a Celestion Blue speaker, plus tube tremolo and reverb. Soon other players began requesting amps of their own, and Hoff's take on the 5E3 theme, the J20, became Lazy J's first commercial

amp.

The J40 is a half-power version of Lazy J's J80 – a tweaked out tweed Twin Designed to combine the punch of the J80 with the harmonic richness of the J20, the J40 features a tweed finger-jointed pine cabinet and eyelet board construction. Even so the J40 is no slavish replica.

The Bright volume control doubles as a push pull switch for gain/midrange boost (both channels) and a negative feedback control replaces the ground switch. A toggle switch, tucked between the preamp tubes, sets the HT voltage in the preamp section. Hoff describes this as a Tweed/Blackface switch.

Inside the cabinet there's a spring reverb tank with two BB boxes on the sidewalls housing the optional reverb and tremolo modules. Tremolo controls are speed and intensity, with a Tone knob augmenting the reverb level control. Along with on/off switches, Speed and Reverb level knobs are also provided on the foot controller.

We tested the J40 with Fender Strats, a La Cabronita Telecaster, and a Les Paul. With single-coils things stay fairly clean on both channels until the volume controls reach half way up. From that point the snarling beast inside the J40 begins to wake and by the time it's maxed out the overdrive is thick, creamy and loaded with harmonics. At the same time there's a woody texture with some degree of looseness in the low end. It's raw, without being edgy, but there's a dose of bluesy rudeness and honk in there too.

Increasing negative feedback tightens things up to an extent, simultaneously delivering a bit more clean headroom and clarity. Compared to tweed amps with single tone controls, the J40 allows you to dial in plenty of treble sheen.

For blues and rock tones we kept the mid boost engaged, but cleaner blues, country and Travis picking styles sounded better with the mid boost out and the blackface switch engaged. The switch opened up the treble a tad and reduced the J40's natural compression.

The tone controls are interactive to a degree, but the midrange knob has the most influence on the sound and feel. Adding midrange eases the J40 into a grunty overdrive with enough cut from the upper mids to make you turn down Presence and Treble. Upper harmonics are so plentiful you can roll your guitar tone right back for a 'woman tone' and still retain definition.

The Taden speaker comes from a relatively small UK speaker manufacturer with a growing reputation amongst builders. Loaded with an alnico magnet, the ACE 50 is closer to the Celestion Blue than a Jensen in efficiency, frequency response and breakup characteristics. We compared it against a Jensen P12N and the Taden was brighter, louder and more articulate. With extra of compression and midrange bark, it mixes classic US overdrive with beefy British breakup and a hint of Voxy chime.

The on board effects didn't disappoint. The reverb level control allows for very subtle settings as well as cavernous surf tones. It also blends well with the dry signal to add a halo around the sound without becoming dominant. The tremolo circuit acts on the bias of the power tubes. It's deep, slightly swirly and loads of fun.

Sonically the J40 bridges the gap between the tweed and blackface eras, adding wider tonal range and user control over dynamic response to the harmonic complexity and player friendly feel of a 5E3. Hoff builds every

Lazy J amp himself, so there is a waiting list. He also encourages customers to discuss the tone and features they require before placing an order. Like many of the best modern amp builders, Jesse Hoff hasn't reinvented the wheel, but he has figured out how to make one that's just about perfect. No wonder the big guns are buying them. —*Huw Price*