



MI Amplification Iron Duke \$1,799

This new Aussie-made 50 watter packs some serious punch, and has all the markings of a future classic *by Steve Henderson*

Talking with Michael Ibrahim of MI Amplification is always an educational experience. It's not that he speaks in authoritative absolutes – on the contrary, he is quite open to the opinions of others and willing to be pleasantly surprised. This is why his products address players' needs so directly: because he listens. His ideas are focused, well researched and, while readily giving credence to an alternative view, he knows why he has taken a given approach in developing MI amps and effects. So, when

Michael releases a new piece of gear, we know that it has been well thought out and is not there to simply fill a gap in the marketplace.

Sounds

At the heart of the Iron Duke is an A/B power amp driven by a pair of EL34s. The operating voltages on the power tubes are intentionally lower than other high gain amps, which probably accounts for the gloriously open clean sound. In fact, the Iron Duke doesn't sacrifice any of its clean tone for the sake of the drive channel – the clean output is 50 watts and then some, even without the boost engaged, and the tone is broad and rich. You'd be hard pressed to find a more transparent clean tone in an amp with EL34s – most have a kind of furriness that doesn't quite clip enough to be useful. Even dialing up some crunch, the tone stays big and dynamic.

This channel alone is worth the price of admission, but the boost function adds some gain

and re-voices the tone controls for a fatter sound. Cool! Both the Clean and the Boosted Clean sounds are further modifiable with their own "mod" switches (adding low end presence in the Clean channel and extra gain and focus in the Boosted version) and a common bright switch. This simple and versatile arrangement delivers a Brit-style amp that goes beyond the norm. With a smoother top end, a lower noise floor and a faster dynamic response it's perfect for the purist or the pedal nut. And we haven't even touched the drive channel!

Ah, the drive channel! There's some serious gain on tap here, and yet it doesn't wash out with white noise buzz but stays rich and robust. It ranges from almost perfectly clean (cleaner than a Marshall) through to Plexi crunch and creamy smooth. The Mod switch adds more gain stages for a contemporary hi gain attitude but, useful as this function is, we didn't use it for too long

because the raw channel sound is so damned infectious. It responds brilliantly to the guitar's output so there's a huge array of sounds available just by varying the pick attack. Again, this one channel is worth all the effort. The Attack switch is interesting: designed to match your guitar, it's worth messing with when using any guitar because it can round off the front of the envelope without any compression. With its dynamic response, you could live inside this channel for a long time and not get bored.

Channel 2's Boost channel adds gain and a more focused midrange, with a tight response that still sounds harmonically rich and vibrant (how'd they do that?) without fuzzing out. If you're after old-school heavy rock and metal, the Iron Duke's Boosted Overdrive has it in spades. Engage the Mod switch and the tone scoops out for a more "recto" sound... modern metal, but still broad and rich, and not as generic as most other amps. Not only that, fade your

guitar volume back and the drive changes character but stays tight across the spectrum without any fizz or stutter.

The Iron Duke's two channel/four mode arrangement offers a variety of set ups. With no boosts engaged it's a familiar "clean and dirty" amp that just about everyone understands – plenty of useful sounds that we know so well. But in rock setting, we simply turned on the boost footswitch and left it on – using the amp's channel switch to swing from brown crunch to hot hi gain. Both of these methods offered loads of flexibility and tone for days! Adding a couple of pedals in front gave us even more (but often unnecessary) options. An MI Effects Crunch Box or a Suhr Riot, both set fairly conservatively, provided new

If the neighbours start to complain, switch it to half power for the creamiest 25 watts you've ever heard

flavours to the already-smooth amp distortion. Overdrive and boosts pedals LOVE this amp – the Iron Duke just seems to understand them, and the value of keeping the internal voltages fairly low really pays off with any gain-based device.

Of course, you can treat the Iron Duke as a four-channel amp. The two channels are quite different and there's enough contrast between the two modes of each channel to access a seemingly endless range of EL34-style sounds. This power amp is enhanced by Presence and Depth knobs, for tweaking the highs and lows respectively, but the kicker here is that the range of this Depth circuit can be adjusted to the player's (or the cabinet's) particular liking. We used a Mesa/Boogie quad with C90s and Vintage 50s, a Marshall 1960B and a custom closed-back 212 with G12-65s. Each cab adds its own thing but the amp's tonal bed is pure British rock – a little more robust and certainly with a lot more range and options, but unmistakably British nonetheless.

Verdict

The Iron Duke's 50 watts will suit just about everyone in most situations. Even in large venues this much power will fill the stage and still be controllable. There's a certain something about a pair of EL34s that is definitely rock 'n' roll – this type of power amp is not quite as smooth as a hundred watter and grinds just that little bit

earlier, which makes it perfect for a huge range of gigs. And if this is all too much and the neighbours start to complain, switch the Iron Duke to half power and you'll have the creamiest (and loudest) 25 watts you've ever heard without compromising the punch and tonal breadth of its full 50 watt response.

While there's plenty of mid-powered heads on the market, there's hardly any that offer the kind of honest, organic sound that the Iron Duke produces. Add to this the clever on-board mods that never mask the basic sound, the superb components and the pedal-friendly front end, and this amp leaves the competition far behind. Even at a \$1,000 more than MI's list price, this amp stacks up confidently against the imported competition. For us, the Iron Duke has become the new benchmark: high quality from any angle, built by musicians for musicians – an Aussie amp for stage or studio that a lot of players are going to want to check out. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: The tones, the mid-level power and the price.

We dislike: ?

Guitarist says: This is destined to be an iconic product - live or recording, this amp is a journeyman that does the business.



MI Amplification Iron Duke

PRICE: \$1,799
ORIGIN: Australia
TYPE: All-tube head
OUTPUT: 50w
VALVES: EL34 x 2, 12AX7 x 3
CHANNELS: Two
FOOTSWITCH: 2-button (included)
DIMENSIONS: 250mm/9.8" (h) x 643mm/25.3" (w) x 225mm/8.9" (d)
WEIGHT: 16.5kg/36.3lbs
MI Amplification
02 9519 5908
www.miamplification.com

Test gear

Cabs: Mesa 412 (2 x Celestion C90's, 2 x Mesa 50's), Mesa 112 (EVM-12L), custom 212 (Celestion G12-65's), Marshall 1960B. Pedals: Boss DS-1 and DN-2, Suhr Shiba Drive and Riot, Hermida Zendrive, MI Effects Crunch Box. Various guitars.



Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

