

Boutique Amps: Monolith from TONEHENGE Amplification in Germany

Review by Udo Pipper

In recent years I received many emails from readers about boutique amps. Often the writer complained that the manufacturers usually lack the courage to go in a new direction with a new design: "Is it not possible, today, to do it a different way than Marshall, Fender and Vox have done in the past?"

Too much gets copied and regurgitated. So wrong because, in general, boutique products are already moving along well-trodden paths. The manufacturers complain that a new design is just far too expensive to produce. This is correct, because boutique amps are purchased only in small quantities by buyers. They serve a market that does not really exist. Here and there a new chassis and cab are constructed, but they always remind us of the shapes of the traditional geometry of typical role models.

A young Canadian residing in Rastatt, Germany, wants to change that now. Bold as a *Bang & Olufsen* designer, Irving Blacker has devoted himself to a design that immediately splits the guitarist community. The *Tonehenge Monolith* is already a more than respectable visual statement about tube amp design. Like the unusual guitar designs by *Auerswald*, *Ritter* and *Teuffel*, this product dispenses with all known forms and reinvents itself according to its own desire. "You will either love it or hate it," Irving admits laconically. "But I really wanted to do something new."

The name "Monolith" seems to be in his design message. On the whole it stands 134 centimeters high and the slender column of sound towers above all other so-called stacks. Slim, elegant and thoroughly modern. At the front, solid aluminum ribs protrude like the grille of a *Rolls-Royce* towards the beholder. The deep-grained wood veneer is polished to a shine, like a high-end hi-fi speaker or a grand piano. That this should actually be a rock 'n roll tool becomes only apparent after one ponders it for a moment.

How should it be transported? How to combine it with other amps? How does such a construction hold up after the first tour? All these questions can only be answered in the future. One thing is for sure though, something like the *Monolith* has never been seen before. And it happens to have caused mouths to water from a few pros, too. Carl Verheyen, Joe Bonamassa and Larry Carlton were curious about plugging into the luxury model and were more than pleasantly surprised, because this unique amp sounds damn good.



148 12.12.2011 8:00

The *Monolith* is therefore not an amp, where only the glossy facade conjures quality. To use one of our examples again: *Bang & Olufsen* has simple *Philips* technology installed. The Danish noble manufacturer is primarily known as a "wrapping artist." On the other hand, the *Monolith* is equipped with the latest technology under the hood. The only things traditional about this amp are the tubes, *Mercury Magnetics transformers* and *Celestion* speakers. The rest corresponds to a quality that in guitar amplifiers was previously sought in vain. Irving Blacker and his meticulously selected technical team have literally spent years to put together an optimum in components, which is beyond all known standards.

For example the high-quality potentiometers are usually found only in the most expensive hi-fi systems, as well as the internal wiring, all of which promise high-quality signal processing.

Each amp is also comes fully equipped with cable from *Evidence*

Continued on next page...

Audio Siren II speaker cable, *Monorail* shielded cable, choice of *Lyric* or *Forte* guitar cable, and a power cord that alone is more expensive than a small combo amp from the Far-East. Everything should match together and ultimately nothing should impede an optimal sound. Inside, it looks similar to a modern computer. Instead of solder lugs and vintage plastic-sheathed cables, here is a solidly-built modern high-quality board which is so perfectly made, and as luxurious in appearance, as the gracefulness of the entire *Monolith*. Even behind the power socket an opulent line filter extends into the interior. Literally everything has been thought through to completion.

The block diagram looks usual for a modern amp. There is a Clean channel with Volume, Treble, Mid, Bass, and a Crunch channel with Gain, Volume, Treble, Mid, Bass. Add to this a Master section with master Volume, master Presence and master Reverb. The latter controls a built-in digital unit that has been specially programmed in Germany for the *Monolith*. That's it!

On the back there is a footswitch jack for channel selection, two switchable speaker outputs with 4, 8 and 16 ohms, a variable line-out and an effects loop. It is all just as much as only necessary, but normally enough for the majority of cases. The structure of the *Monolith* is clear and self explanatory... no voodoo switch, no push-pull pots and no mini-switches!

The towering speaker enclosure houses a *Celestion Heritage G12H* and a *Celestion Alnico Gold*, a blend, that according to Irving Blacker, fits perfectly to the sound of the *Monolith*. With speaker selection though, the customer has a hand in choosing. After all, Irving Blacker sells through his company *Tonehenge* the *Weber* speakers on the European market. "There's always room for wishes," says Irving. "The Monolith is only a basic framework in which the customer also has a hand in creating." This also applies to the cabinet. There are numerous alternatives for color, wood and paint. Yes, even cabs painted or carved by artists are offered. On the sample we previewed, we had the chance to admire an airbrush design with attractive guitar art. On top of that is the stunning polished high-gloss varnish. Despite all the modern ingredients of the *Monolith* it is a cleanly laid out and thoroughbred tube amp.

I would find it easier if I could fall back on describing the sound of known reference samples. But the product vigorously denies this as there is nothing that reminisces *Fender*, *Marshall* or *Vox*.



STREIBER & SUTTORP 2013, 11

The clean channel is, for example linear and unswervingly neutral in its tuning that it recognizes neither the strengths nor the weaknesses of the famous classics. Rather, this channel brings all samples to a design of an attractive tube clean sound to a wonderfully catchy blend. You hear the player, not the guitar and the amp! The amplifier is not primarily loud, nor does it roar, but bundles all the nuances of the guitarist. And that is the way it should be! From Volume at position 5 the sound goes into a very fine and pleasing crunch sound, which should enchant mainly blues fans. The tone shines with a fantastic mid-range without any weakness. It sounds warm, dynamic and assertive with a resolution so fine that one can represent all the nuances of his playing effortlessly. Likewise, the tone controls actually work with predictable quality. From 0-to-10, the filters work continuously and are effortless to operate when dialing in your tone.

The reverb unit is reminiscent of a good studio reverb *Lexicon*; long and deep, without noise and clatter. And perfectly enriches the sound as you would desire it to. The crunch channel offers exactly the same qualities and character as the clean channel, but with much more gain and a little more emphasis in the midrange. The bass sound is a bit slimmer and starts from volume on 3 to really growl. Depending on the gain setting, the *Monolith* produces a beautiful lead sound that is great for rock and fusion alike. It is a bit reminiscent an early *Dumble* amp or the tones of players like Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour and Robben Ford. In this genre, the channel might be more at home than with AC/DC. A singing lead tone with a nice mid-range and very fine-selectable distortion characteristic is the focus of this unit.

Summary

As expected in such an exquisite boutique product, the *Monolith* thus offers not only finest ingredients for the eyes, but also outstanding tone in all parameters. I'm very curious how this conspicuous creation will place in the market but having never encountered something as original I find it hard to believe that this amp will not find its fans. The *Monolith* worthy of an award, not only in terms of design, but in its technical structure and its sonic possibilities. In any amp test I have rarely been allowed to develop as much curiosity and eagerness as with this amp. Simply brilliant!

The Tonehenge Monolith
www.Tonehenge.de