

With three channels and a heap of DSP effects, the new FlexWave aims to answer your clean prayers and filthy dreams. Review: Dave Petersen

Crate

FlexWave 120/212 Combo

Crate, the St. Louis, Missouri outfit that arrived on the scene with a wacky range of fruit-crate-cabinet combos, has come a long way in the past 37 years. Its amps now cover a wide swathe of musical territory, but the company's perhaps best known in the UK for the little battery-powered Taxi combo, popular with buskers everywhere. Now part of a bigger company, Loud Technologies, Crate has lines poised to fight at all weights, from a USB-ported practice amp to big models sponsored by such heavy names as ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and The Eagles' Joe Walsh.

The normal survival strategy these days is for equipment to be designed in the home market territory and put together in China. The FlexWave is a good example of what can be achieved like this in terms of features for money. It's Crate's most ambitiously-equipped combo to date, fitted with three-channel switching, an array of DSP-driven effects, and a memory-driven Channel Tracking feature. This allows different DSP selections to be assigned to each channel and registered, rather than one selection that may have to be adjusted every time you switch. Fair enough, you say... but what happens when I switch off? Well, the power-down settings come up when you next switch on – and as if that isn't enough, you can have two different settings per channel, accessed by the footswitch.

First Impressions

Solid Brit-style cab with US layout and graphics. Many knobs, but easy to work with. Tuner looks bolted-on, but it's the only place



It's a good technical balance of smart and conventional, in which each plays to the strengths of the other

The DSP menu is varied, with Reverb, Chorus, Flange, Phase and Echo on tap. Reverb and Echo can be used in combination as well as with any of the mod effects. Add to this three switched channels' worth of analogue sounds, and it looks as if there's no limit to the tonal facilities you can command. FlexWave seems to offer a good technical balance of smart and conventional, in which each plays to the strengths of the other.

Structurally, the amp embodies current 'cost-effective' practice. The strength is all in a tidily-built 18mm box which feels very roadworthy. This is all to the good, as the chassis is on the thin side and not a stand-alone proposition. All it has to support is one modestly-sized transformer and two long PCBs, but it's entirely dependent on the integrity of the box. All

being well, this will be enough. The same applies to the lack of control-panel overhang: the controls do look a little exposed to accidents. Crate knows its business, but boys will be boys...

SOUNDS

From the user manual, which you can handily get online without having to buy the amp, it appears that everything goes through the DSP section full time, and FlexWave means that the preamp signal is processed there to give a valve response. This explains the power-up hash as the software initialises – but it disappears as soon as you connect your guitar.

The Clean channel with everything set to 5/10 gives a well-defined sound with no lack of bottom-end – in fact it's rather biased towards that end of the

FACTFILE

FLEXWAVE 120/212 COMBO

RRP: £349

Description: 120W channel-switching solid-state combo with DSP & built-in chromatic tuner. 2x12" Crate speakers

Front panel: Single jack input. High gain channel: Gain, Shape, Level; High Gain/Overdrive selector (piloted); Overdrive channel: Gain, Low, Mid, High, Level; Overdrive/Clean selector (piloted); Clean channel: Volume, Low, Mid, High. Effects: Reverb Depth; Modulation (Chorus, Flanger, Phaser); Delay (Short, Medium, Long); 3.5mm CD input jack; illuminated Power switch

Rear panel: Mains fuse; External speaker jack; Footswitch jacks (DSP, Channel); Insert (effects loop series line-level stereo jack). Under chassis: IEC mains connector

Accessories: Three-function footswitch (Clean/Dirty, DSP, Overdrive/High Gain), braking castor set

Dimensions: 66cm wide, 50cm high, 32cm deep. Weight: 22kg 48lbs

Contact: Loud Technologies ☎ 01268 570808

Web: www.crateamps.com

THE COMPETITION

LINE 6

Spider III 150

Stereo power for chorusing and huge palette of modelled sounds make this a dangerous opponent, but getting your own sound may be easier on the Crate, with little to choose in general sonic quality

RRP: £386

VOX

AD100 VTXL High Gain

We'd expect greater flexibility in the Drive selections, with sound quality to match – but the Vox puts up some strong competition in the Clean channel contest

RRP: £399

MARSHALL

AVT275X

Stereo power, but more conventional than the Line 6. Separate DSPs for each channel approximate Crate's Channel Tracking. A back-to-back is the only real way to tell, but keep that £100+ price difference in mind

RRP: £462

spectrum. The touch response is pleasant enough, without quite achieving the slack-strung feel of some valve amps, but that can be a mixed blessing for chord-players who need to cut through. It held together nicely for some Townshend-inspired chords on a Gibson SG, while a Strat had a precise and positive feel and more than enough twang for any normal purpose. The only deficiency is in level; an amp set at half volume should get further towards its power limit than about 20 per cent, and the FlexWave only gets what you'd call loud as you approach 8 or 9/10, where there's a jump in the gain. The volume's there, but it's on a small, twitchy section of the control's range. This could be awkward under live conditions, where the physical crowding of the controls won't help.

The tone stack, on the other hand, is nicely engineered. The Bass pot has plenty of swing, a smooth gradient, and keeps things from flapping out at high volume without sucking out the low mids. The Mid pot doesn't make much of a hole at minimum but compensates by a nicely-tuned boost capability for those who like a fatter sound on their single-coils, again smoothly incremented. Treble serves its purpose, but those wanting extremes will need to choose the right guitar as a first approach – the swing is limited, even if the register is well-judged.

On to the DSP, which is where the money gets spent. The Reverb pot adds a pleasing large-hall effect, well integrated, with no tendency to sound added-on or 'after-echo'-ed. We'd be happy with this result from a spring-tray; in fact, it's better than many, and you'd welcome the slight noise penalty (worse at high settings, which you're not likely to use)



The controls look busy, but are easy to navigate – though they're too closely-packed for easy on-stage tweaks

The Clean channel is well-defined with no lack of bottom end, and the tone stack is nicely engineered

over the ear-splitting crash of an accidentally disturbed tray any day.

The mod effects are less impressive. We had trouble distinguishing between Flange and Phase aurally, although in analogue technology they're quite distinct from one another, and looked quite different when we checked them out on the 'scope. The Phaser, particularly, transits in and out of phase so rapidly you can hardly hear it doing so, which could account for the apparent lack of bite. Chorus, too, is no better than okay, and no threat to a Roland JC120. More homework is needed here generally, although if you like subtle blends, these may suit your needs. Repeat Delay, on the

other hand, is a delight, with a quiet background and plenty of choice on the Repeat timing. We spent too much time attempting Scotty Moore licks.

Your reaction to the Overdrive channel will depend on musical preferences, because flexible it ain't. If you favour a hard-edged, buzzy percussiveness that can cut through loudly competing guitars then it's got something to offer – and it's where that 120W rating finally makes itself felt. If you're looking for a smooth transit from clean to dirty, let us know if you find it. The Gain pot only knows two settings, 'sorta' and 'downright', and even these need the Strat to work. The sudden appearance of edgy, buzzy distortion is an on-off phenomenon that no tone-stack

setting can qualify. The High-Gain channel has much of the same quality, with a somewhat thinner high-end, although its extra sustain suits it to the same tasks as a metal pedal such as a Rat. The Shape control has the effect of creating a U-curve in the response, or removing it. It sorts down to these channels most likely appealing to hardened pedal-users, who will probably have all they need in this line already. The Drive side of the FlexWave may work for it in some markets, but we don't see it improving the amp's overall chances in this country.

VERDICT

With all these criticisms, you might conclude the FlexWave isn't worth your attention. Actually, its virtues – a good clean sound, good reverb, excellent echo – suit it to different musical tasks than its makers perhaps intended. They outweigh its vices, which may easily be made up by using the effects loop or pedals in line with the guitar. To get an amp as good as this one in its strong areas, you could pay significantly more money.



FINAL SCORE	
Build Quality	13/20
Playability	12/20
Sound	14/20
Value for money	19/20
Vibe	16/20
TOTAL	74%
Good for... jazz, country/country rock, soul, surf and clean pop	
Look elsewhere... for blues-rock or metal	