



Thermionic Culture

Solo Vulture



A new bird has made its nest in Thermionic Culture's stable – but will it fly or fall? **John Pickford** flexes its wings.

Solo Vulture

Manufacturer **Thermionic Culture**

Price **£1,333**

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Key Features

- Valve direct injection
- 4 distortion flavours
- Presence boost
- Selectable mid-lift
- Low-pass filter
- Clean and Dirty channels

Method Spot

Once the Solo Vulture has been used for tracking purposes it needn't sit idle. When mixing, try strapping it across a guitar track in Triode mode and experiment with the Drive and Bias controls to add a little bit of graunch. Selecting one of the Mid Lift settings will help the guitar to find its own space in the mix. For a more obviously overdriven sound, use the Pentode mode with a higher Drive setting. Easing back on the Bias control will really make the guitar cut through a busy mix. This method works equally well on keyboard tracks.

The original Culture Vulture appeared in the latter half of the 1990s, and a studio in which this reviewer regularly works acquired one of the early production models, so we are quite familiar with the distinctive style of valve distortion that it produces. Over the years, Thermionic has produced several different flavours of the unit, including one tailored for mastering applications and a special Anniversary edition that features EQ filters similar to those found on this brand-new model. All previous incarnations of the Vulture have been stereo/dual mono units; however, this new bird is a single-channel mono device, the first of several that the company will be unleashing in the future.

The two-channel Vultures are usually thought of as pieces of studio outboard designed to be used in the recording and mixing processes in much the same way as one might use, say, a compressor; however, this Solo version focuses on the unit's guitar, bass and keyboard DI'ing capabilities, and as such will appeal to recording and gigging musicians as well as studio engineers and producers.

Although this model is mono, it has two switchable channels – Clean and Dirty – each with an output level control for precise volume balancing. The switch makes use of light-dependent resistors and is silent in operation when either the toggle switch is employed or a foot-switch (not supplied) is connected to the foot-switch jack input.

beautifully full and velvety when used subtly, and retains a deliciously creamy-smooth overdriven sound even at high Drive settings. Pentode (P) mode produces 3rd harmonic distortion, which has a much edgier character that can sound quite lacerating at maximum Drive settings. The final two distortion types are named Squash – SQ1 and SQ2 – offering an altogether more aggressive style of distortion, producing compression effects and, when used to extremes, obliterating the signal almost completely; this is the most severe Vulture we've ever heard.

While the Drive pot controls the signal level fed to the distortion valve, the Bias pot determines the amount of current passing through it, with the

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A high-gain DI jack input is located on the front, with a similar high-gain line jack input at the rear that is overridden when an instrument is plugged into the DI input. The line-in is 'semi-floating', which means that horrid solid-state distortion is not introduced if a balanced source is connected to the unit. Input Gain – which, like several of the controls, has a wonderfully retro chicken-head knob – is selectable in four steps (5–35dB), with a slight top-lift evident as gain is increased. Using a 12AX7/ECC83 input valve, this stage goes directly to the 5725 double-triode output stage when the Clean channel is selected, while in Dirty mode the signal is further amplified before reaching the 6AS6 distortion valve.

Distortion Type comes in four configurations, with Triode (T) providing 2nd harmonic distortion that sounds

current level shown on the milliammeter. Fully anti-clockwise, the valve receives maximum current, producing the fullest tone, and as the bias is increased, the valve is starved of current, resulting in a progressively thinner sound that becomes almost choked at extreme settings.

Limited EQ

Most variants of the Vulture do not feature an EQ section, the exception being the limited-edition Anniversary model (no longer available). Happily, we can report that these features are present on the Solo. The Presence control is a three-position switch that can be set to Flat, Half or Full presence boost. Looking at the frequency response curves, the boost is quite broad and smooth, gently peaking at just over +8dB around 2kHz at the Full

setting, and generally emphasising the upper midrange and treble. The Mid Lift curves are much sharper, giving around 12dB of boost at 0.5kHz, 0.63kHz, 0.85kHz, 1.1kHz and 1.6kHz, with a very high Q. Thermionic Culture boss Vic Keary told us that these frequencies were selected to relate to musical chords, and in practice it's possible to highlight guitars or other instruments when tuned to the key of your track.

The final part of the EQ section is the Low Pass Filter (LPF), which operates at 15kHz, 9kHz and 4kHz; again, this is a sharp filter – 12dB/octave. It's worth pointing out at this stage that the EQ can be used only in conjunction with the Dirty channel.

Going Solo

For our first test, we used the Solo Vulture to DI an assortment of instruments including a newish Fender Strat, a late 60s Gibson EB-3 bass, an 80s Roland Juno 60 and some Mellotron samples. Later, via its low-level line out, we used the Vulture in conjunction with the Strat plugged into a Fender Twin. As we mentioned at the beginning, we're well aware of the Vulture's exceptional distortion

qualities, and this new unit did not disappoint. Whether gently warming the sound of our Gibson bass or going crazy with the Drive and Bias controls to get some serious dirt from the Strat, the Solo provided superb valve saturation that ordinary distortion boxes can't compete with. The EQ controls – particularly the Mid and Presence boosts – impressed us enormously, offering well thought-out curves that can be used in a musically creative way.

Vic Keary told us that the EQ circuits and the switching were designed by "boy genius" Ricky Sharp, an 18-year-old electronics prodigy with a passion for valves. He was introduced to Vic by Thermionic designer Jon Bailes, who, among other things, designed the unit's excellent front-panel layout. As Vic oversees the design of all Thermionic products – and has been designing valve circuits for over half a century – the Solo is truly pan-generational.

As far as DI units go, the Solo Vulture sits right at the top of the tree. It can be used Clean – to process signals in an open and full-bodied way – or Dirty, to musically enhance audio by means of its vast array of distortion styles and superb EQ tone-enhancers. **MTM**

Measuring Up

Valve DI boxes are relatively uncommon and we are not aware of any that have anything like the Solo Vulture's unique distortion and EQ features. However, should you require a straight valve DI box, A-Designs' REDDI Valve DI Box (£630) is a hand-built unit that has a very good reputation within the recording industry. If you are intrigued by the distortion capabilities of the Solo but would prefer a two-channel unit, Thermionic's Culture Vulture is still available in both standard and Mastering Plus guises. The limited-edition Anniversary edition is sadly no longer available, but the company is considering the possibility of an EQ-equipped Mastering version. Watch this space!

MTM Verdict

WHY BUY

- + Superb valve sound
- + Comprehensive distortion
- + Specially tuned EQ
- + Excellent build quality and top-drawer components
- + Intuitive and gratifying

WALK ON BY

- Footswitch not provided (so be sure to buy one!)

The Solo Vulture is a first-class product with a fine pedigree. As a DI unit it is second-to-none, and the brilliant distortion and EQ features mark it out as an extremely flexible unit, capable of making the most out of any audio signal fed in to it.



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