

# Crate FlexWave

## Solid-state guitar combo

### Roger Cooper

**B**ased in Missouri, St Louis Music was started way back in 1922, and since then this company has gone on to provide products for virtually every area of the music-making industry. Electric guitars have long been a high-profile part of a comprehensive catalogue, and in the late '70s the decision was made to enter the attendant amplification arena.

To ensure extra attention in the already crowded marketplace, the earliest amps came in packing case-style cabs, an eye-catching aspect that also provided the appropriate brand name for this new line: Crate. Initial examples were introduced in 1978 and over the ensuing 30 years the range has continued to gain popularity and expand accordingly. The original, somewhat crude crate-type packaging was soon superseded by more stylish, conventional cladding, but by then its high novelty factor had helped establish the brand and the name was maintained.

Latest in a long, on-going line of many differing Crate guitar amps is the FlexWave range, launched at the outset of 2007. Like so much of the modern opposition, this most recent Crate creation employs the cost-effective combination of American design and Chinese manufacture. The FlexWave series spans a selection that includes the FW15 practice combo, the larger FW65/112 and the all-singing, all-dancing FW120/212. These designations signify relevant specifications and indicate that this month's review subject is the beefiest and best equipped of the bunch.

First impression of the FlexWave 120/212 is that it's a pretty burly beast, but its 22Kg weight is far from excessive for a twin 12-toting combo. This is a back-saving benefit of solid-state amps and something worth serious consideration by anyone who lugs their own gear about. Those who enjoy the luxury of legions of muscle-bound roadies can afford to indulge in heavyweight chunks of wood and metal, but cash-strapped mere mortals in the semi-pro sector need to keep their chiropractic bills to a minimum.

### Construction

The edges of the slightly sloping front are chunky enough, but 18mm particle board is employed elsewhere. Echoing the asking price, this is a more cost-conscious choice than plywood, although the end result should prove

Crate's latest creation packs three channels and digital effects into a twin-twelve 120W combo that's light on both back and bank balance.

roadworthy enough for its intended market. However, it's worth noting that, despite protective packaging, the review sample has already suffered damage at the less-than-caring hands of hauliers, displaying a sizeable split along one top edge. This doesn't mean that the FW120/212 is a frail weakling, just that it should be treated with some consideration.

The cab comes in neatly applied, lightly textured black vinyl, and sizeable plastic protectors cover all corners, with even bigger examples flanking the control panel. Those on the bottom carry somewhat spindly rubber feet, but Crate thoughtfully include push-fit castors, with the sockets already in place on the base. Up on top, a centre-mounted strap handle offers an easy, if slightly unbalanced lift, and heat vents are conspicuous by their absence, as this solid-state combo keeps its cool courtesy of a well-slotted chassis.

The silver-grey grille cloth maintains a somewhat sedate cosmetic theme, and the speaker baffle is surmounted by a full-width black plastic strip carrying the company logo. The model designation indicates

the use of two 12-inch speakers, and these are labelled Crate Custom Design. They're arranged in slightly staggered formation, which helps reduce overall dimensions and also supplies a wider spread of sound. The interconnecting cables are somewhat untidily installed, hanging down and easily snagged — a potential problem made more apparent because of the open back, with ample space between the chassis and a single, low-slung rear panel.

The full-width, light-coloured control panel carries very clear legending and is angled back for even better visibility, although this means that the knobs are quite exposed. Their only protection comes from the aforementioned chunky plastic end cheeks, so due care should be taken during transportation.

### Controls

The FlexWave's triple-channel format means a lengthy line of controls after the single input. The pots are quite closely packed, considering the actual space available, and all employ black



# 120/212

✓ From left to right, the controls are: Gain, Shape and Level (for the High Gain channel); Gain, Low, Mid, High and Level (for the Overdrive channel); Volume, Low, Mid and High (for the Clean channel), and Reverb, Mod and Delay (for the Effects section).



plastic knobs topped by suitably prominent position pointers. The High Gain section comes first in the queue, comprising Gain, Shape and Level pots. The latter naturally determines relevant output, while Gain governs distortion and Shape alters tonal content, enhancing mid-frequencies or offering extra lows and highs.

Next along is the Overdrive side, with Gain and Level backed up by Low, Mid and High tone controls that also affect the High Gain option. The following Clean channel employs the same style of three-band EQ, but is accompanied by just a single volume. The all-digital Effects department is last in line, with Reverb partnered by two pots that modify Modulation and Delay. This pairing provides three options each for Chorus, Flange and Phase, while Delay is divided into Slap, Medium and Long settings, again offering a trio of selections per choice.

Intervening push-button switches supply manual channel operation, confirmed by adjacent indicator LEDs, but the circuitry doesn't allow going directly from High Gain to Clean, or vice-versa; instead each is reached by passing through Overdrive *en route*, which entails pressing both buttons in appropriate order.

Play-along potential is provided by a stereo mini-jack CD input, and the final control feature of this FlexWave combo isn't actually found on the front panel — an onboard guitar tuner is neatly inset into the top of the cab, and this compact piece of kit employs an array of LEDs to confirm correct pitch.

Feature-wise, the long rear panel looks very lean in comparison. The mains input is located on the underside of the chassis, which makes plugging in a bit fiddly, especially as the speaker cables dangle in close proximity, but at least the supplied lead is sensibly long. The single

extension-speaker socket is wired in series with the internal driver, which remains operative when another cab is added, something that isn't always the case where solid-state amps are concerned. An insert jack allows an external effects unit to be incorporated into the signal chain via a suitable split lead, while two more stereo connections accommodate the included footswitch.

Employing a usefully lengthy connecting cable, this is a lightweight, aluminium and plastic affair that hosts three stomp selectors. The first two function as remote channel changers, while the third offers a choice between two pre-selected banks of the amp's onboard digital effects. Different examples of the latter can be individually allocated to each channel and these choices are then automatically stored and recalled using Crate's already established 'Channel Tracking' facility. This also operates on the second effects bank chosen for footswitch selection.

## In use

Powering up provokes a flurry of lights from the tuner and a slight chatter through the speakers as the software initialises, then things settle down to just a gentle background hum. Operation automatically defaults to the clean channel and this is a very good place to start, having first checked one's tuning of course, as the constantly flashing lights of that little gizmo in the top of the amp provide a very visual reminder to perform this particular task.

Tweaking the Clean channel's quartet of controls quickly yields a very usable sound. The EQ side proves usefully effective and musical, ably delivering a nicely balanced blend that should suit most six-strings. Undistorted output is ample too, an aspect still erroneously considered unimportant by far too many modern amp makers, but actually essential for any player who doesn't just desire World War Three in a box. However, the sweep of the Volume pot isn't exactly even, with the most obvious upsurge in output achieved in the very final turn, but the ensuing result is certainly big and stays suitably unsullied.

Switching to the central Overdrive section brings a significant boost in volume, along with a lot less subtlety. There's simply no way of introducing just a hint of break-up crunch as a logical progression from dead clean. Instead, full-on distortion is very much the order of the day right from virtually minimum position. This all-or-nothing operation makes it hard to obtain an even transition from the previous channel and is akin to stamping on a pedal set to excess.

Matching the extra output, the tone controls are even more obvious in operation and certainly offer a wide range of aural extremes.

In terms of dishing the dirt, the High Gain channel pretty much starts where the Overdrive side stops, which means copious quantities of thickset, buzzy distortion that's now accompanied by virtually endless sustain. Again the Overdrive channel's tonal trio makes dramatic differences, but with so much gain on tap the sound can quickly become indistinct and distant. The Shape facility adds icing to the EQ cake, supplying a sonic sweep that spans deep scoop to hard-edged honk.

The onboard effects are a more refined, if somewhat mixed bunch in terms of aural abilities. Reverb ranges from ambient to expansive, but stops short of supplying authentic surf splash, while the selection of Delays actually verges on delightful. The Mod menu seems a mite makeweight in comparison: the various Chorus, Flange and Phase effects are present and reasonably correct, but they don't compare too well with their standalone equivalents.

## Conclusion

Crate's FlexWave 120/212 combo packs in a lot of features, some more practical than others, and its performance virtues are very much down to personal preference. The fact that it goes from clean living and mild-mannered to hard-nosed hooligan, with no middle ground in between, is guaranteed to polarise player opinion. Those who love over-the-top distortion in abundance will really appreciate this amp's metal merits, while guitarists seeking greater subtlety may choose to look elsewhere, although its attributes are made all the more impressive by a very competitive asking price. ■ PM

## Performing Musician

Crate Flexwave 120/212  
£349

Topping Crate's latest range, this US-designed combo delivers 120 Watts via twin 12-inch speakers, three channel choices and an assortment of digital effects. The end results encompass aural extremes that may delight or deter players, but value for money isn't in doubt.

Loud Technologies +44 (0)1268 570808  
www.loudtechinc.com  
www.crateamps.com

## Tech Spec

### Flexwave 120/212

- Solid-state guitar combo.
- Output: 120W RMS.
- Two 12-inch speakers.
- One input.
- High Gain, Overdrive & Clean channels.
- Five digital effects.
- Built-in tuner.
- Effects loop.
- External speaker output.
- Three-way footswitch supplied.
- Dimensions (WDH): 668 x 330 x 508mm
- Weight: 22.08Kg