

# Exotica

## Diezel VH4



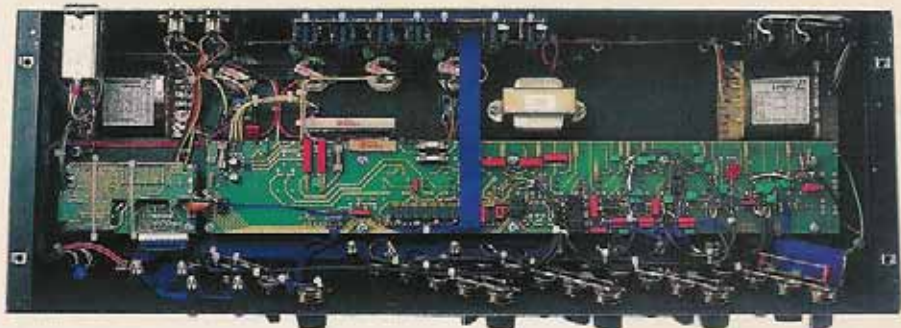
By Darrin Fox

**A** large number of boutique amp builders go for all things retro, but manufacturers such as Bogner, Soldano, and VHT offer a different breed of boutique beast for players who want face-melting high-gain tones, multiple channels, and effects loops. The Munich-based Diezel company is a relative newcomer to the high-gain, boutique amp arena, but as their VH4 head proves, there's room at the top if you've got what it takes. This marvel wins an Editors' Pick Award.

### Diezel Power

The wicked-sounding VH4 (\$4,124; \$4,320 for the stereo VH4S) is a 100-watt tube amp with four independent preamp sections, effects-loop options galore, and, most importantly, a vast array of incredible tones. Channel 1 walks the line between American and British flavors—you get tantalizing Fender sparkle, but the VH4's lunging punch also *screams* Hiwatt. It has one of the loudest, most detailed clean tones I've ever heard. Pumped through a Marshall 4x12, the VH4 produces astonishing thump, yet remains airy and open—quite a feat with a closed-back cab.

Channel 2 delivers punishing low end, hearty midrange chunk, and complex treble frequencies. (Think of it as the AC/DC channel, and you've got the idea.) In fact, the VH4 offers a plethora of tones from channel 2 alone, and the superbly voiced bright switches (on channels



The VH4 sports a multitude of speaker and effects loop jacks, and its interior is clean and rugged. Below: The VH4's slanted controls make it difficult to see which channel's knobs you're actually turning.

1 and 2) can elicit righteous high-end ping even from a Les Paul's neck pickup.

The VH4's third channel provides a *very* close approximation of the early-Van Halen "brown sound"—it's throaty and unbelievably dynamic. The gain is equivalent to the burn mode of most amps, yet, by simply mellowing picking attack, you can achieve a husky, purring clean tone. Nice.

Channel 4 is where the VH4 shifts into high gear, lathering on distortion so thick it's almost laughable. The frothy nature of this channel is sure to send high-gain fans into a frenzy. It puts everything from milkshake creaminess to sucked-mid depravity right at your fingertips. The VH4's global deep control is subtle with a 4x12 cabinet, but it adds noticeable depth



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when using the amp with an open-back 1x12.

### Knobs and Knuckles

The Diezel's four channels are laid out in mixer-like vertical strips. Each channel has a lighted selector button; independent treble, mid, bass, gain, and volume controls; and 1/4" channel-insert jacks. The slanted knob layout saves space, but it can be disorienting. (I often found myself turning the wrong knob.)

Global controls include master volume, presence, deep, master mute, MIDI functions, and effects-loop mix. A front-panel jack allows you to link the Diezel to a separate power amp. The VH4 sports two global effects loops (series and parallel), five speaker outputs (2x8Ω/1x4Ω; 2x16Ω/1x8Ω; 1x16Ω), and MIDI In and Thru jacks. MIDI programmable functions include channel switching, activation of the effects loops and channel inserts, and master mute on/off.

Four tube-fault LEDs (one for each output tube) alert you in case of tube failure. Should this occur while you're playing, the corresponding LED will light, and the amp will automatically switch to the healthy pair of tubes. This lowers the power, of course, but at least you can finish the gig. The tubes are also individually fused. We auditioned the VH4 with its supplied quartet of Yugoslavian 6L6s, but a bias switch allows for quick substitution of 5881s, EL34s, or 6550s. The power transformer is also switchable to 115-volt or 230-volt operation.

The Diezel's interior is a masterpiece of rugged design. The pots, jacks, and output-tube sockets are mounted to the heavy, folded-steel chassis. The smaller components (including the nine preamp tubes) reside on an 1/8"-thick, glass/epoxy PC-board. The wiring is beautifully routed, and all switching functions are handled by gold-contact relays. The cabinet construction is clean, and the black Tolex is flawlessly applied. My only complaint is that the VH4's two-piece front grate rattled annoyingly when the amp was played at high volumes.

### Maximum Overdrive

The Diezel VH4 is a rare breed. It delivers stellar clean tones, as well as coherent and musical ultra-high-gain sounds. Many amps barely give you one great sound, let alone four. And the VH4 can do it at skull-crushing volume—it's as loud as the loudest Marshall I've ever heard! Granted, this amp isn't cheap. But its jaw-dropping tone, exceptional construction, musically voiced EQ, and MIDI capabilities make it a must-have for those lusting after a truly state-of-the-art amplifier. Diezel, dist. by Salwender International, 1140 N. Lemon St. #M, Orange, CA 92867; (714) 538-1285; www.salwender.com.

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Hit the mode switch again and the knobs automatically rotate to their original positions.

Preset selection is accomplished via a set of up/down keys, and stored sounds are activated by pressing the recall button. The motorized knobs require anywhere from one to ten seconds to move into their updated positions when a new preset (or mode) is selected, but there's no audible lapse, as the internal settings change instantly. You can also turn a knob and instantly hear the result—no need to "capture" a parameter by first wiggling the knob back and forth. Nice.

**Sounds.** The DG80 is hands down the most natural-sounding amp of the group. It produces crisp, warm tones, and offers surprising complexity and dimension in both its clean and distorted modes. The DG80 provides amazing tube feel, and its super distortion tones clean up well when you lower the gain. This amp is also extremely quiet—all the more astonishing as it doesn't use a noise gate.

The DG80 shined in the studio, producing a convincing tube-like lead grind from its direct out. Volume isn't an issue either, as the amp has more than enough muscle to hang with a full band. Though you can't press a button and instantly hear a blackface Fender or plexi Marshall simulation, the DG80 is better equipped to recreate those sounds than some of its competitors. Many of the presets are real standouts. Number 1 (Clean 1) yields exceptionally crisp and detailed tones with shimmering reverb color. Number 19 (Texas Blues, Slight Overdrive) is an extremely ballsy lower-gain lead sound. Number 22 (60w 1x12 Tube Combo O/D + EQ) packs the old-school-rock vibe of a gained-up Mesa/Boogie MK I. Number 26 (British Stack Clean Sound) is a surprisingly good clean setting that delivers cool, Hiwatt-like grind as you turn up. Many of the high-gain sounds benefit from turning up the bass, and even presets that weren't instantly exciting responded beautifully to EQ tweaks.

Given the DG80's considerable processing power, it's a drag that the amp doesn't sport a few more effects. But considering how good the reverb and delay sound, the absence of chorus and tremolo seems less of an issue. The 3-knob echo is handy for dialing in low-fi rockabilly slapback, and if you want really ambient sounds, just crank up the delay time and add some hall reverb—it's not exactly a tube Echoplex washed in Lexicon reverb, but it's not far from it.

**Pros.** Amazingly natural sounding. Excellent interface. More than enough power for gigs. Editors' Pick Award winner.

**Cons.** Limited effects. Weighs as much as a tube amp of equal wattage.

Thanks to Joe Gore for his assistance and insights.

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