

VOX NIGHT TRAIN HEAD £425
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMANDA THOMAS



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Hop on board the Vox Night Train for an express ticket to great tone! *by Nick Guppy*

What we want to know

1 What is pentode/triode switching?

Some valves, such as the EL84, are known as pentodes because they have three grids to improve efficiency. Triodes (like the 12AX7) have just one grid. Switching off two of the grids reduces output power.

2 What's wave soldering?

An automated process for simultaneously soldering all the joints in a printed circuit board. In simple terms, a conveyor belt takes the PCBs over a bath of molten solder, which is excited to form standing waves. The waves make contact with the solder points on the bottom of the board, and on a through-plated board the molten solder is pulled up through the holes by capillary action.

3 Who is this amp for?

Any player who wants usable vintage-inspired tone and response at a competitive price.

Vox has enjoyed a strong resurgence in popularity in recent years, thanks in part to some excellent designs and solid backing from high-tech giant Korg. One other thing which has definitely shifted the market in Vox's favour is competitive pricing, a result of this most British of British amp brands shifting most of its manufacturing offshore. Traditionalists may grumble, but it's a strategy that has not only kept the brand alive, but revitalised it in a very competitive market. Vox chose to debut several new products at this year's winter NAMM and we're going to take a look at the most interesting, the evocatively named – and styled – Night Train head, designed with assistance from US amp legend Tony Bruno.

Small but perfectly formed and about the same size as a retro toaster, the 15-watt Night Train's vintage-inspired metal case is certainly going to draw more than a few admiring looks. We like the heavy-duty chrome steel lid with its diamond perforations echoing the classic Vox grille cloth pattern. The rest of the styling is neat, albeit bland, with simple silk-screened white on black front and rear panels. The parts-bin power indicator LED is a bit of a cop-out, which

shouldn't really be on any Vox amp. With this kind of construction it's not only important to make everything fit together neatly, it has to come apart easily when needed. The Vietnamese-made Night Train's metalwork is accurate, however, the steel lid has no means of locating it, making it very fiddly to replace. The fixings are small machine screws with fine threads, which will be very easy to ruin by cross-threading.

Inside the full metal jacket chassis, the Night Train's electronics are mounted on one large double-sided PCB, which is also through-plated. This is a good quality board, but unusually for Vox the soldering

on this sample is less than satisfactory. Wave soldering is a critical part of PCB manufacture and very easy to cock up. The boards should only be in contact with molten solder just long enough for the process to work – too long and capacitors cook, while resistors drift from their original values, ruining the consistency that PCBs should provide. Too quick, and the solder doesn't go everywhere it's supposed to go, leaving the board prone to dry joints and early failure.

This particular board, seemingly, has been soldered way too quickly, and the hand-soldered valve bases aren't perfect either. Quality control issues like this are usually sorted out swiftly, so we wouldn't expect all Night Trains to be the same as this early prototype.

The control panel is easy to understand – this is a simple,

The Rivals

Orange's Tiny Terror (£313) is clearly the inspiration here and it comes with the same valves and is also switchable from 15 to seven watts.

Fender's Blues Junior (£449) is a 15-watt dual EL84 amp comes in combo format with a single 12-inch Eminence driver. The original steel box amp: **THD's UniValve** (£725). It's a lot more expensive but is in an entirely different galaxy in terms of tone, features and build quality. It won a Gold Award when we reviewed it back in 2001, enough said.



The bright/thick switch serves to disconnect the EQ network



single-channel design with a couple of twists. Rotary controls consist of a straightforward set of gain, volume and three-band EQ. A small toggle switch labelled bright/thick serves to disconnect the EQ network, returning a lot of extra gain back into the signal channel in the thick position. The Standby switch offers a choice of two 'on' positions, either full-power pentode or half-power triode, delivering approximately eight watts. On the rear panel, there's a pair of speaker outlets for eight- and 16-ohm cabinets and that's it. There's a mains fuse contained within the IEC mains socket but the rest of the fuses are on the PCB. We'd prefer to see both mains and HT fuses on the rear panel for ease of replacement. Despite the small dimensions, two good-sized transformers mean the Night Train is not lightweight, and ignoring the soldering on this sample, the overall impression is one of reliability with a touch of style.

Sounds

Probably inspired more by Guns N' Roses than Jimmy Forrest or James Brown, the Night Train has apparently been designed with assistance from legendary amp guru Tony Bruno, creator of the EL84-powered Underground 30, which consistently wins top awards in USA boutique reviews. Bruno builds some of the best amps on the planet and allegedly also lent a hand to an earlier version of Vox's limited edition hand-wired AC30. This guy knows great tone, so we were interested to see what the 'Bruno effect' would be.

The Night Train's tone sits fairly and squarely in the Vox camp, with a glassy treble that falls just a touch short of piercing. The mid-range is smooth and warm without being too overpowering, unlike the bass end of the spectrum, which is very powerful indeed. The tone controls work smoothly and predictably, with enough range to cater for humbuckers and single-coils. Overdrive addicts will be pleased to hear that this amp has a lot of gain on tap, especially when you disconnect the tone circuit by flipping the

small toggle switch into thick mode. The strong bass means you can pull off modern stuff without any difficulty – detuning to D doesn't mush things up too much as long as you don't go crazy with the gain and volume control. Up above the halfway setting, the Night Train's output stage tends to take over from the preamp, stamping its own response on things. At these levels single-coils work better than humbuckers, holding definition more or less all the way up to 10, with a fast response that sounds great for blues-rock.

At lower levels, the amp cleans up nicely and the glassy treble is great for modern pop/rock chord work. There's plenty of power in the 15-watt setting for live use; we hooked up a single 12-inch ported cabinet, which provided an excellent spread of sound – a 4 x 12 would go even further. Home users and studio rats should take note that the Night Train – at least this sample of it – is not particularly impressive in the noise department. Hiss and hum are quite noticeable at higher gain settings and for any kind of serious recording work you would need to put a noise gate in the channel insert. Giggling is another matter entirely – you can turn up with guitar in one hand and the Night Train in its padded carry bag slung over your shoulder and, so long as the venue has a cab (or you have your own), it's just plug in and be ready to go in seconds with a great tone and plenty of volume.

Verdict

The Night Train may look a little like a toy, but when it comes to tone it outguns many other small heads. However, the most obvious competition – Orange's Tiny Terror – is seriously good too and, like the Night Train, competitively priced. If you like the Vox tone you can get it easily enough from this amp and a lot more. It can sound convincingly vintage or modern.

The Night Train doesn't do out and out aggression, although it can be quite belligerent when needed, so metal players should look elsewhere. The lack of clean/overdrive switching and effects loops means that this is an amp for those players who know how to get what they want by controlling things from the guitar, and used like this the Night Train is in its element. Taking everything into consideration, we reckon the Night Train could find a lot of fans, as long as quality is maintained to the standards we expect from Vox. Definitely one train worth catching. **G**

Bottom Line

We like: Good tone; good looks; lots of versatility from a simple circuit

We dislike: Too noisy for serious recording use; no external fuse access

Guitarist says: It looks cool, sounds hot and the price is about right



Vox Night Train head

PRICE: £425

ORIGIN: Vietnam

TYPE: Single-channel amp with solid-state rectifier

CONTROLS: Gain, bass, mid, treble, volume

FOOTSWITCH: None

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Bright/thick switch bypasses tone circuit, Pentode or triode power stage operation

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Vox has a range of competitively priced extension cabinets available if you like to keep the same badges on everything – the 4 x 12 Celestion-loaded V412BL retails at £299, while the vintage-styled V212BN comes in at £241

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Test results

Build quality	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★☆
Sound	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★☆

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



The pentode/triode switches between the three-grid and one-grid system