

MESA/BOOGIE TRANSATLANTIC TA-30 COMBO, HEAD & 1 x 12 CAB £2,136, £1,911 & £483
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOBY SESSIONS

Mesa/Boogie TransAtlantic TA-30 combo, head & 1 x 12 cab

£2,136, £1,911 & £483

Guitarist CHOICE

The rivals

The **Hayden MoFo 30** (£449) is a 30-watt, four-EL84 compact head. It's nowhere near as flexible as the TA-30, but it is a quarter of the price. We liked the **Vox NightTrain 50 head** (£659) when we reviewed it in issue 342. Two channels of British grunt, but none of the TA-30's US leanings, nor any reverb. The **Two-Rock Jet 35 head** (£2,399) is a phenomenal compact two-channel amp with a price to match.

Mesa's genre-leading lunchbox amp gets twice the power in this upscaled version. Is it twice the fun?
by Mick Taylor

Just over a year since we first tested the Mesa TransAtlantic TA-15, its bigger brother has landed. For anyone who missed that review in issue 330, here's a brief recap. It's called TransAtlantic because it spans classic British and US tones, specifically Vox-inspired when it comes to cleans and crunches in channel one. Then in channel two it's a brief sojourn into mid-gained Marshall territory (Hi One) flanked by Mesa's more common post-Fender clean (Tweed) and high-gain tones (Hi Two), direct from the US of A: five modes in total.

The main rotary controls are straightforward; the only one requiring further explanation is the cut/master in channel one. When pulled out it's a master volume for the channel, and when pushed in becomes tone cut (essentially a master presence) control very similar to what you'd find on a Vox AC30. The volume pot then becomes solely responsible for pre- and power amp volume.

Both the reverb and effects loop have channel-specific hard bypass switches if you want them completely absent from either or both channels. When it's not hard-bypassed on the front panel, you can switch the loop in and out with the supplied footswitch, and it is also possible to turn the reverb

on and off remotely if you purchase an additional switch. What that means is that you can access both the effects loop and reverb in any combination across the two channels.

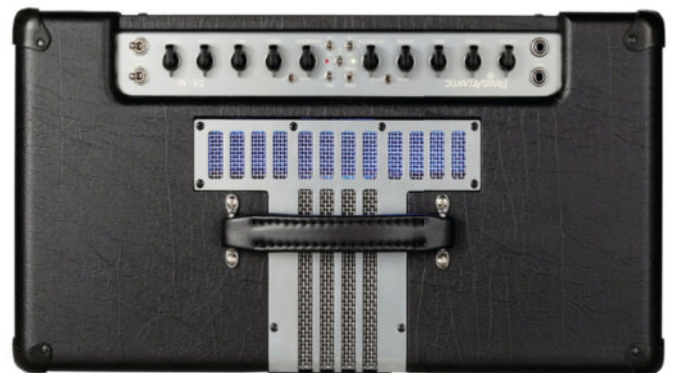
Like the TA-15, you can't fail to be impressed with the general styling of the TransAtlantic. Combo or head, the satin nickel metalwork, blue-backlit grilles and flawless finishing leaves you in no doubt these are meticulously made amplifiers. Inside it's the same story; custom through-plated PCBs at the centre of a clever circuit that marries classic Vox and Fender influences. While that may sound simple in principle, to do it with real valve circuits that include both reverb and an effects loop is serious headache, given the vast differences in how an AC30 is configured compared with a Fender Bassman, for example. Point-to-point wiring enthusiasts may scoff at the production line PCB approach, but Boogie's Randall Smith and his team remain adamant that not only is this the best way to make amplifiers that are consistent and reliable, but it's the only way.

Full marks are awarded for the padded gigbag for the head, and the padded cover for the combo. Fewer manufacturers are doing these nowadays, and at these prices, we expect it!

Sounds

Powered up, there's a vast degree of difference in each of the five modes, so don't be afraid to tweak. Channel one has a clear Voxy character as you'd expect, thanks as much to the preamp circuit as the cathode-biased EL84 power section with no negative feedback (an essential pairing for classic Vox tone). Top Boost mode is more gaily than

Normal, and really starts piling on level as you wind the volume up. Harmonically rich, chiming notes and chords abound, right into rock distortion with humbuckers. In the 40-watt mode particularly this is a stronger tone than many a newer AC30, which can sound brittle at lower volumes. It ticks the boxes from sixties pop to driving country, blues and Stratty Hankisms.



The satin nickel metalwork, blue-backlit grilles and flawless finishing leaves you in no doubt that these are meticulously made amplifiers



In full-power Dyna-Watt mode, the sheer attack of clean notes from either combo or head can be eye-popping, especially through Mesa's custom tweaked and well-proven Celestion 90-watt speaker. Loud drummers, no problem. Busy mix, likewise – we can't imagine too many players wanting for more volume, though the headroom characteristics are obviously quite different from a four-6L6 100-watt amp.

The 30-watt class A mode will still out-shout most drummers, but with increased elasticity from the power section when you push it hard. If that's too much, drop to 15 watts class A (two of the four EL84s) for much more clip and compression at the power stage – something notoriously difficult/impossible on a non-master volume AC30 these days without upsetting the soundman/landlord.

Channel two's power stage is configured fixed bias with negative feedback (like most Fenders and Marshalls). Tweed mode kicks off with that fatter-than-you-remember-it Fender-inspired tone, but you really do need to wind it up to get things going. With strong mids and urgent delivery, it's more rounded than channel one and very familiar if you've played a Tweed Deluxe or low-power Twin. The bright reverb just makes it all the sweeter.

Hi One adds a huge level jump with extra gain too. There's a tightened bottom end, which will appeal to humbucker players looking for some classic rock fun, or indeed darker/bassier sounding guitars that can get muddy on the bottom: ES-335 players looking for excellent articulation take note. Angus Young is here should you need him, too.

Moving on to Hi Two brings a punch of mid-range focus and a swathe of bottom end back for something closer to what you'd think of as 'classic' Boogie leads. Tons of harmonics,

In full-power Dyna-Watt mode the sheer attack of clean notes from either combo or head can be eye-popping. Loud drummers, no problem



Guitarist CHOICE

plenty of gain and the addition of the boost function over the TA-15 means it'll go more gainy in either of the Hi modes, obviously. The lack of a dedicated middle control means that 1980s-inspired metal tones are better served from Mesa's other amps, but heavy rockers will still find a lot to like. You can single-note solo all day here, with your choice of dynamics thanks to the three power settings.

The supplied 19-inch, open-backed 1 x 12 does a good all-round job with the head, but lacks the outright depth of the bigger combo box. The larger available 1 x 12 or 2 x 12 would be our choice for the head – a quick demo at Mesa HQ in April yielded a huge tonal spread from the 2 x 12. Do try different cab formats, however, as it makes a significant difference to the resultant tone and all our tastes differ in that respect. And as tempting as it may seem, try not to skimp by pairing it with a cheap extension cab. A quick demo of one of Mesa's cabs alongside a lesser box will explain why immediately in terms of volume, clarity and tonal depth.

Verdict

More power, added reverb (hooray!), an effects loop, and an extra boost mode in the second channel. Those are the on-paper differences between the TA-30 and its little brother. On the end of your guitar that adds up to a seriously versatile gigging amp.

The harmonically rich character of the classic Vox circuit receives an appropriate Mesa-hallmarked update in channel one, while channel two delivers a similarly tweaked adaptation of the ubiquitous Fender Tweed circuit that has informed so many amp milestones, from the Marshall Bluesbreaker to Mesa's own Dual Rectifier. With flexible power options that are as much about feel as out-and-out volume, the TA-30 in either head or combo format is an extremely compelling professional proposition. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Portable; very versatile; loud

We dislike: Controls face backwards on the combo; the hefty price tag

Guitarist says: All the good bits of the exceptional TA-15, but with a ton more headroom, more gain, reverb and a loop. Extremely hard not to like

Mesa/Boogie TransAtlantic TA-30 combo & head

PRICE: £2,136 & £1,911

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All-valve, two-channel, five-mode combo or head with solid-state rectification

POWER: 15, 30 or 40 watts

VALVES: 6 x 12AX7, 4 x EL84

CONTROLS: Channel one: volume, treble, bass, reverb, cut/master, two-way mode switch, three-way output power switch, FX loop and reverb bypass switch. Channel two: gain/boost, treble, bass, reverb, master, three-way mode switch, three-way output power switch, FX loop and reverb bypass

SPEAKER (combo only): 1 x 12 inch Mesa-Celestion MC-90

FOOTSWITCH: Two-button switch for channel change and FX loop on/off

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Spring reverb, series effects loop. Each channel can be run independently at either 15, 30 or 40 watts, 2 x 4-ohm, 1 x 8-ohm speaker out. Reverb on/off control jack. Padded gigbag included

WEIGHT (kg/lb): Head: 8.8/20 Combo: 21/47

DIMENSIONS: Head: 440 (w) x 180 (h) x 220mm (d); Combo: 580 (w) x 445 x 300mm (d)

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: TA-30 rackmount head (£1,968), TA-30 2 x 12 (£2,249) combo, TA-15 head (£1,129)

TransAtlantic 19 1 x 12 Cabinet

PRICE: £489

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: 1 x 12 extension cabinet

POWER HANDLING: 90 watts RMS @ 8 ohms

SPEAKER: 1 x 12 inch Mesa-Celestion MC-90

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: 8-ohm input, paralleled out

DIMENSIONS: 485 (w) x 400 (h) x 295mm (d)

RANGE OPTIONS: Mesa makes a wide range of 1 x 12, 2 x 12, 4 x 12 and 4 x 10 extension speaker cabinets

Westside Distribution

0141 248 4812

www.mesaboogie.com

Test results

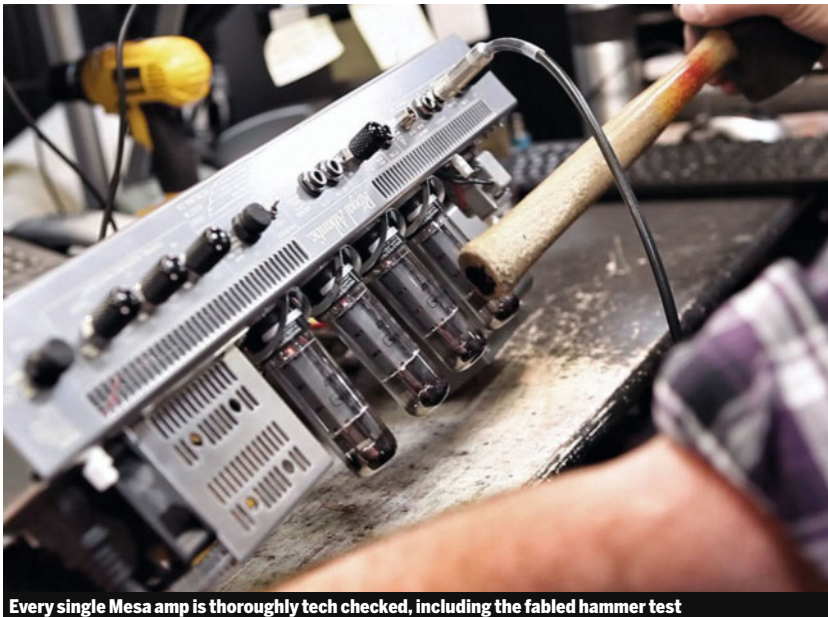
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Smith with three Mesa milestones: an original snakeskin Mark I, the Mark V and the TA-30

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICK TAYLOR



Every single Mesa amp is thoroughly tech checked, including the fabled hammer test



The all-important QC card is signed off at every stage



What's next? Royal Atlantic 100: this was the first off the line!

Mr Mesa

Randall Smith, Mesa/Boogie's founder and designer, gives his thoughts on his latest creation **Words Mick Taylor**

Back in April, we visited Mesa/Boogie's Californian home to watch the TransAtlantic amps being built and chat with their designer about the process so far. "In one of our idea sessions," smiles Smith, "I threw the name TransAtlantic out there and everyone said, Woo that's a great name! So in this case the name came first!"

What made you look to Vox for your inspiration?

"Well what should it be? Obviously it should be British and American, that's for sure, but which one? So Marshall, y'know we've got the Recto, the Stiletto... we should do something we haven't done. Vox is on the resurgence here and man, that is a great classic sound – we should do our own take on it. The other channel should be much closer to home, given that we're on the Pacific side of the Atlantic here and we all grew up in Fenderville. That was the genesis."

Presumably that presents an instant problem – the circuits are radically different, right?

"The beauty of the Vox circuit is its utter simplicity. It really only has one whole 12AX7 in the whole preamp before it gets to

the driver stage and on to the power tubes – slightly different if it's a Top Boost with tone controls, of course, because then it has to have the extra stage. But the key to getting performance with so few tube stages lies in the fact that the driver and the output section run with no negative feedback. What negative feedback does, number one, is that it reduces distortion. Number two, it can be used to influence the EQ curve of an amplifier and as a consequence of both of those it reduces the gain – that's why it's called negative feedback. A portion of the speaker output signal is fed back into the driver, but out of phase so it works to cancel a portion of the original signal coming in. That is at the heart of the difficulty of making a TransAtlantic.

"Also to try to have a signal place where you can put in an effects loop and/or a reverb is really quite a trick because the whole signal architecture is really different. In a normal, Fender-based amplifier – especially one that's got a master volume – you have sufficient preamp gain and amplitude that the obvious place to put the effects loop is at the end of preamp, at the beginning of the power amp.

You can't quite do that with the Vox circuit because the power amp driver is such a crucial part of the overall gain structure. You know, you don't need to know about the problems – my job is to solve them so that the thing just works."


What about biasing? Obviously the fixed bias part of Mesa is extremely important in the way you make amps, but the classic Vox circuit is cathode biased... How do you get over that in the TA series?

"Well a Class A, cathode-biased circuit is fixed too, dependant on whatever values of resistors are put in the circuit – that's how it works. If you have a big cathode resistor, it tends to neutralise the effects of tubes that have different current draw characteristics. If you have a tube that draws a lot of current, the voltage drop across the cathode resistor is greater and that's the equivalent of biasing it to run cooler, so they're self-regulating to a degree – it's a brilliant part of that simple circuit. The downside is that the output tubes are working at full output all the time, even when you aren't playing a note they're just burning themselves up; that's the other side of class A. Tone wise, sound wise, it's a world of difference for the Vox sound.

That class A/cathode biasing is appropriate and traditional. Then you get over to the US side and it still sounds good to have it class A, cathode biased, but it actually sounds better with our Dyna-Watt – well, we think it sounds better!"

How does Dyna-Watt work?

"That's a dynamically enhanced version of a regular class A/B push-pull – it's livelier, punchier and more dynamic. The key is that the power supply charges up voltages and holds them for a certain length of time, so that each note really comes out with a burst of power, then the power supply voltage sags right down immediately.

What worried me was that different players, especially in different styles of music, would all disagree what was the right amount of time lag. And they didn't! I had it set up with these rotary switches that could pan through different values, and what was gratifying was that they all picked the same. It started out all stiff and tight, then we hit this point where they found it easy to play, and after that it all fell apart where the time constant got too extreme. The physics of the guitar aren't changing, but mentally they are to the player. It just works." 

"You know, you don't need to know about the problems – my job is to fix them so that the thing just works"

Randall Smith