

Vox AC30C2 & AC15C1 **£822 & £528**

Guitarist CHOICE

Has Vox got the balance between authentic spec, classic tone and affordability right? With these two AC Custom models, it's taken another step closer... **by Simon Bradley**

The Vox AC15 and 30: bastions of British tone that defined a generation in sound. Since the UK-made reissues of the 1990s, the brand has been continually evolving its solution to affordable-yet-authentic new versions of its number one sons. A significant watershed came in 2005 when Vox switched production to China for the well-received Custom Classic series. Player feedback, however, told Vox's designers that the CC's myriad switches and options were largely surplus to requirements, so what better reason to revisit the design, save a bit of cash and offer an all-new, more stripped-down AC30 and AC15 Custom? Intrigued? Yep, us too...

AC30C2

The very first AC30s didn't have the fabled Top Boost section; it was originally something you could have as an upgrade if you returned your amp to the JMI factory in Kent. Later models had it as standard of course, and it's no surprise to see it included here alongside a 'normal' channel. The two channels aren't footswitchable, though each has its own inputs and volume control, feeding the master volume – unlike original AC30s – and Tone Cut pots.

The Top Boost channel also has a pair of tone controls while

the onboard reverb and tremolo sections, both controlled by two further pairs of controls, are applicable to both channels. It's possible to plug instruments into both channels at once.

The livery here is evocative of the old-school as always, with the chicken-head knobs and purple top panel working perfectly with gold piping and brown diamond grille cloth.

One of the most important features for tonehounds and collectors when considering a vintage AC30 is the provision of Celestion Alnico Blue speakers. Our review model has the more affordable 25W Celestion G12M Greenbacks, though there is also a Blue-loaded version (the AC302X at £1,292).

The rear panel offers a mono effects loop, with the additional feature of a bypass switch to enable you to remove it from the signal chain entirely, and there's also a choice of speaker outputs: the extension jack allows you to link a second cab in the traditional manner, plus the socket marked External outputs the sound while also muting the internal Celestions.

The optional two-way VFS2 footswitch turns the reverb and tremolo on and off – it seems a bit stingy to have to shell out another £32 for the privilege.

Weighing in just over 32kg, it's a fairly hefty amp, as you'd

expect but any portability issues are done away with thanks to the three strong plastic handles that enable you alone, or with help from a bandmate, to move it.

Internally, the Custom is built around a modern PCB design like the majority of new amps from the big brands. One notable change from 'proper' AC30 spec is that the Custom has a solid-state rectifier instead of a GZ34 valve.

Sounds

Traditionally, the classic-spec Top Boost AC30 offers chiming clean tones with a brilliant-bordering-on-gritty edge, all of which gets darker and more overdriven as you wind it up. Much of that is in evidence in the Top Boost channel here, but thanks to the master volume setup, it's much easier to coax the AC30C2 into overdrive at lower levels. The Normal channel has less scope for adjustment and is cleaner sounding – we achieved good results jumping the channels with a patch lead and mixing the two. Overall, this amp feels more overdriven than one of the older UK-made reissues, and as a result, slightly less visceral too which is no bad thing. Few players have the luxury of cranking a non-master volume AC30 to its full potential; the new amp is still plenty loud enough for gigging, but gives you the flexibility to set up tones from '60s-inspired cleans through to a convincing classic rock overdrive at any output level. Don't expect super-clean cleans when the master is cranked, however: this amp loves to drive. We've run through myriad tones during the video demo on this month's CD, but whether it's a brash Fender Tele ably

The rivals

AC30C2

For a hotter Class A experience, a good choice is the vintage-styled **Laney VC30-212** (£649). The 1 x 12 **Peavey Classic 30** (£592) also bristles with EL84 power valves, although the definitive American AC30 tribute [and then some – Ed] remains the wonderful **Matchless DC-30** (from £3,699).

AC15C1

Try the Eminence-loaded **Fender Blues Junior** (£499) or **Laney's VC15** (£389), the latter loaded with a single 10-inch Jensen speaker. For the ultimate in low-powered tone machines, give **Dennis Cornell's** all-valve **Romany Plus** (£999) a whirl – it can provide as low as 0.05 watts of output.

mimicking Lennon's trademark Ricky twang or a soupy Epiphone Casino that adds cream to the mix, this AC30 Custom is certainly versatile – it even does a good Brian May at – gasp! – a manageable volume!

The reverb can span subtle and warm or deep and brash – as you like it – while the tremolo throbs deep and beautiful for atmospheric musings.

AC15C1

If the thought of an AC30 hurts your back and eardrums, the 15 will appeal, a classic in its own right. Rated at 15 watts this new version also offers Top Boost and Normal channels, albeit with just one input for each instead of the 30's two. The remainder of the black front panel is the same as that of the AC30C2 and the entire chassis is sited the opposite way around. The build principles are the same as the 30, but with a single 12-inch speaker.

Sounds

The cabinet here is what Vox historians would describe as 'oversized' when compared to vintage AC15s but, at 602mm wide, the additional cubic volume should add depth to the tone in the familiar manner.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP SOWELS

The colour scheme and top-mounted chicken-head knobs are quintessential AC30



Tonally the amp provides more of a vintage flavour than the AC30C2 – the low-end is more flabby and the overdrive less focused which is good news for old-school sounds, less good for modern drivey ones. In other words it sounds classic Vox, which may seem an obvious statement!

Turning the Top Boost channel's volume all the way up gives a beautifully silky tone that can be balanced with the Tone Cut and efficient tone pots to taste and, if you grab a Strat, turn the treble up and take Tone Cut out, you could almost be strumming a 12-string Ricky, such is the bell-like quality. It's this shimmering drive, tamed to taste with the Tone Cut, that has made AC15s such a popular studio choice for lower-gain, classic rock, blues and pop-derived tones. Whether it will replace the ToneLab modeller in your recording system will depend on your potential to make proper noise, but boy does it sound good with a mic on it. And just try not going overboard with the reverb and tremolo – they're addictive.

Verdict

These amps mix versatile tonal performance with modern build standards at very attractive price points. Die-hard Vox fans will bemoan the master volumes and absence of a valve rectifier in the AC30, but Vox's Heritage Collection is there for those folks. These new Customs are more about achieving classic Vox flavour but with a nod to modern usability. The AC15 is the more traditional of the pair,

and comes recommended for drummer-less gigs and recording. The AC30C2 offers more headroom for bigger gigs, covering some classic AC30 ground, but with a hotter, slightly more contemporary feel to the overdrive, giving it wider appeal than a vintage-correct reissue. At a shade over £800 we'd say that's excellent value for a quality, all-valve 2 x 12 combo.

You might think that Vox is a bit old-school for you, but we'd urge you to give either a try and see just what 50+ years of heritage could do for your sound and playing.

The bottom line

Vox AC30C2

We like: Authentic look and features; great varied tones; attractive price

We dislike: No footswitch included

Guitarist says: If you've been put off by previous AC30s, this, finally, is the one to opt for and enjoy

Vox AC15C1

We like: Genuine Vox-y tones; portability; reasonable headroom

We dislike: No footswitch included; may be a little too traditional for some

Guitarist says: For studio, stage and home use, this amp mixes size, features and tone into a package almost too alluring to resist



Vox AC30C2

PRICE: £822

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Two-channel, all-valve 2 x 12 combo

OUTPUT: 30 watts RMS

DIMENSIONS: 702 (w) x 265 (d) x 556mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 32.2/70.9

CABINET: 20mm particleboard

VALVES: Four EL84 (power), three 12AX7 (pre)

SPEAKERS: Two Celestion G12M Greenbacks

CHANNELS: Two: Normal and Top Boost

CONTROLS: Normal volume; Top Boost volume, treble and bass; reverb level and tone; tremolo speed and depth; master tone cut and volume

FOOTSWITCH: Optional Vox VFS2 footswitch (£32)

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: High and Lo inputs for each channel, effects loop, external speaker output, extension speaker output

OPTIONS: The AC302X (£1,292) offers the same spec aside from a pair Celestion Alnico Blue 12-inch speakers

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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Vox AC15C1

PRICE: £528

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Twin-channel, all-valve 1 x 12 combo

OUTPUT: 15 watts RMS

DIMENSIONS: 602(w) x 265 (d) x 456mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 22/48.5

CABINET: 20mm particleboard

VALVES: Two EL84 (power), three 12AX7 (pre)

SPEAKERS: Single Celestion G12M Greenback

CHANNELS: Two: Normal and Top Boost

CONTROLS: Normal volume; Top Boost volume; treble and bass; reverb level; tremolo speed and depth; master tone cut and volume

FOOTSWITCH: Optional Vox VFS2 footswitch (£32)

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Single inputs for each channel, effects loop, external speaker output, extension speaker output

OPTIONS: None

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★