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FENDER BASSBREAKER 45 HEAD & BASSBREAKER 18/30 2X12 COMBO £589 & £569

Fender breaks the mould with a new vintage-inspired range, sporting a subtle UK influence

Words Nick Guppy Photography Joseph Branston

What You Need To Know

- 1 The Bassbreaker name sounds a little familiar...**

In around 2003, Fender produced a short-lived 2x12 version of its reissue tweed Bassman, powered by Celestion Vintage 30s. It's not related to the new range, although both use Celestion drivers.
- 2 What's a 'tweed' amp?**

The Fender amps that were produced during the 1950s, especially those from 1955 to 1959, were covered in a tough yellow and black tweed cloth. The tweed 4x10 Bassman in particular is regarded as the first 'proper' guitar amp, with a midrange control, and served as the inspiration for early Marshalls.
- 3 What's the difference between 6L6s and EL34s?**

They're both very popular output valves. The 6L6 is a beam tetrode and originates from the USA; the EL34 is a pentode and comes from Europe. American amps have always favoured the 6L6, while British amps mostly use the EL34. They sound very different, although they're one link in a complex chain.



Time never stands still, and with amps such as Fender's Blues Junior and DeVille now regarded as 'vintage' by many younger players, it's worth remembering that 2016 actually marks 70 years since the first Fender 'Woody' amps. Fender has chosen to kick off the new year with a rare event: a brand new amplification range that takes some of its inspiration from classic British amps of the 1960s, which were in turn 'inspired' by classic Fender designs from the late 1950s, such as the infamous 5F6A Bassman and 5E3 tweed Deluxe. The all-new Bassbreaker range features four different amps, including the Bassbreaker 007 and 15 heads and combos, and the two larger models we're looking at this issue – the Bassbreaker 45 head and the Bassbreaker 18/30 2x12 combo.

Common to all Bassbreakers is a new style described as a "parallel evolution": solid ply cabinets covered in dark grey tweed, black speaker grille with aluminium trim, a

Fender 'block' logo, large pointer knobs and late 60s-influenced control-panel graphics. The amps are designed with the current trend for outboard pedals in mind and have some interesting boutique-inspired features, which vary on each model.

The chassis is similar for all of them: a hefty open-ended steel box made of two angle sections joined by small machine screws. The internals are PCB-based, with two main boards for preamp and power amp supporting all the front panel components and valve bases, joined by a lot of wires and ribbon cables. While everything is densely packed in, the component and wiring standard is very good and our Bassbreakers certainly have the typical Fender vibe of style blended with tough reliability – first and foremost tools for working players.

While they look outwardly similar, the Bassbreaker 18/30 and 45 are very different animals. The 18/30, which is only available



as a 2x12 combo, has a deceptively simple two-channel preamp feeding a quartet of EL84 output valves. Channel 1 has controls for volume, bass, mid and treble, and uses all four EL84s for an output of around 30 watts. Channel 2 has a simple volume and tone control arrangement, and uses one pair of EL84s, knocking the power down to 18 watts. The 18/30's stripped-down vintage design means that many of the features we take for granted on modern amps are missing: there are no tone-altering push-pull switches or effects loops, for example. The rear panel has sockets for extension cabinets together with an impedance switch, a post-output-stage line out and a jack for the single-button footswitch that toggles channels. Apart from that, what you see is pretty much what you get.

The EL34-powered Bassbreaker 45 head takes its inspiration from the tweed Bassman, featuring two preamp channels – Normal and Bright – running in parallel, with separate volume controls and a shared bass, mid, treble and presence EQ. One feature of the Bassman that found its way onto early Marshall designs was the two pairs of input jacks, which could be cross-linked with a small patch cord. With both volume controls active, players could mix the differently-voiced channels for further versatility, as well as benefitting from a little extra gain. The 45 has just one input jack per channel, but a third 'Both' input jack acts as an internal patch lead, allowing selection of either channel or both simultaneously. There's no foot switching and, like the 18/30, there's no effects loop – both amps sit fairly and squarely in the





1. The new Bassbreaker 45 styling is a clever mix of old and new, with grey tweed 60s-style graphics and smart new pointer knobs. The head's control panel is top-mounted, like the combo, making it a little difficult to access
2. The Bassbreaker 45 features a power-scaling-type output control that continuously varies the output from one watt for maximum drive, up to a very loud 45 watts for maximum punch and headroom. A special 'Both' input jack combines the two preamp channels
3. The 18/30 combo features four EL84 valves, all of which are used for Channel 1 for an output of around 30 watts, with just one pair in use for Channel 2, with power down to 18 watts
4. On the 18/30 (shown overleaf), simple volume and tone controls combine with a reduced output level on Channel 2 for thick, vintage Fender tones, inspired by the classic 'brownface' Deluxe of 1959. In contrast, Channel 1 takes its inspiration from the later 'blackface' Deluxe

boutique vintage camp. This duo has a purposeful attitude and solid construction intended to stand up to years of use.

Sounds

Both amps fire up quietly, with no audible mains hum and very little hiss. We tried them with a selection of guitars, including a PAF-powered Les Paul Standard, an old Strat fitted with Duncan Alnico Pro II's and an Ibanez archtop. The 18/30's full-featured Channel 1 is supposed to sound like a mid-60s 'blackface', while the stripped-down Channel 2 is based on an earlier '61 'brownface' Deluxe, an evolution of the earlier tweed amp. Despite EL84s and Celestions instead of 6V6s and Jensens, the 18/30 certainly has something of those amp characteristics, with a bright airy treble and full bass on Channel 1, which sounds superb with a touch of chorus and reverb from a small digital multi-effects. Channel 2 is warmer and more rounded, with a distinct bite at higher volume levels, due to the reduced headroom. Whether it was coincidence or not, we feel this channel is

better suited to analogue effects. Teamed up with an ancient bucket-brigade delay and a modern high-end drive pedal, the result is a big, punchy and very dynamic Billy Gibbons-approved distortion, just right for tearing into early ZZ Top. Our archtop's bridge pickup used with a slapback delay and Channel 2's natural drive effect turns out a great rockabilly tone, as well. With two very efficient Celestion V-type drivers responsible for air-shifting, the 18/30 is also very loud. Both volume controls need to be up around the halfway mark for the amp to work properly, and at this point the 18/30 easily matches most drummers, so it's not really suited for home use.

The 45 is a very different animal. Inspired by the tweed Bassman, it's louder and more aggressive, mostly thanks to the pair of EL34 output valves. The dual preamps can be linked by plugging into the 'Both' input jack, for the highest gain and widest tonal range, while the output level control can drop power to as little as one watt. The 45 seems to work best with a big humbucking tone – the Les Paul is a perfect match for



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lower power overdriven settings, while the Strat works best with higher headroom and more clarity. At those settings, you can come close to the woody thump of the plexi, while less output power equals more drive, pushing into JCM800 territory for screaming solos.

Verdict

We've enjoyed Fender's Pawn Shop Special experiments, but it's brave of Fender to step so far out of its territory with a whole new range that doesn't use the traditional output valves found in most Fender circuits. The EL84 is also in the Blues and Pro Juniors, of course, but we don't know of a Fender that was ever fitted with the EL34 as stock.

Aimed at players of all levels, from home recordist to weekend warrior to seasoned pro, this new range is built to stand up to professional use and quirky enough to appeal to boutique fans, as well as being in step with the current pedalboard trend. They're also keenly priced and stack up well against the competition. Sonically, they have their own thing going on. You can certainly hear the tweed heritage in both amps, but with different valves, transformers and loudspeakers, they aren't clones, and in any case Fender already has that area well-covered. As a new alternative to existing 'Brit sound' choices, the Bassbreaker range has a lot going for it. **G**



FENDER BASSBREAKER 45 HEAD

PRICE: £589
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Valve preamp and valve power amp
OUTPUT: 45 watts RMS, variable down to 1 watt
VALVES: 3x 12AX7, 2x EL34
DIMENSIONS: 290mm (h) x 665mm (w) x 220mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 15/33
CABINET: Ply
CHANNELS: 2, selected by input jack
CONTROLS: Normal volume, Bright volume, bass, mid, treble, presence, output power
FOOTSWITCH: None
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Extension speaker sockets with impedance switch
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The Bassbreaker 007 combo costs £280, the head is £210; the Bassbreaker 15 combo is £470, the head £385; the Bassbreaker 45 combo is £819

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8/10

PROS A great-sounding EL34 head; warm, naturally dynamic overdrive and a clever power-reduction circuit

CONS No effects loops/other features; top-facing controls aren't easy to see when on top of a cab



FENDER BASSBREAKER 18/30 COMBO

PRICE: £569
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Valve preamp and valve power amp
OUTPUT: 18 or 30 watts RMS depending on channel selection
VALVES: 2x 12AX7, 4x EL84
DIMENSIONS: 550mm (h) x 665mm (w) x 255mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 22/49
CABINET: Ply
LOUDSPEAKER: 2x 12" Celestion V-Type
CHANNELS: 2, footswitchable
CONTROLS: Ch1: Volume, bass, mid and treble; Ch2: Volume, tone
FOOTSWITCH: 1-button switch switches channels
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Line out, extension speaker sockets with impedance switch
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See Bassbreaker 45 (left)

7/10

PROS Loud and well built, the 18/30 is great value for money and works really well with all kinds of pedals

CONS Not ideal for home use; no effects loops, despite being such an obvious pedal user's amp