

FIRST PLAY



VOX AC15 CUSTOM HEAD
£586

WHAT IS IT? Head version of the Custom Range AC15 with a built-in attenuator circuit



VOX AC30 CUSTOM HEAD
£838

WHAT IS IT? Head version of the Custom Range AC30 with a built-in attenuator circuit





Stacked In Your Favour

Yet another spin on two Brit classics, these new Custom Heads add portability and power attenuation to the mix

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Joseph Branston

In 1962, a young, upwardly mobile pop group called The Beatles became proud owners of a set of Vox amplifiers, thanks to a canny endorsement deal struck by their manager, Brian Epstein. In the years that followed, The Beatles took over the world and, together with other high-profile users such as The Shadows' Hank Marvin, their success helped Vox become established worldwide as the sound of British pop in the swinging 60s. However, it wasn't until 1992 when Vox was bought by its present owner, Korg, that the brand's true potential was finally realised, and ever since Vox has gone from strength to strength. For 2016, Vox has widened its high-end Custom range to include two new heads – the AC15 and AC30 Custom – that feature Vox's new Reactive Attenuator.

The AC15 and AC30 Custom heads are both fabricated in China, but all the R&D work takes place here in the UK at Vox's UK headquarters. Vox was among the first to shift its manufacturing base overseas and, as you would expect from Korg, the quality control is first class. Inside the cabinets, both amps follow a similar construction, with a robust steel chassis and two main printed circuit boards. The top one is oriented vertically and holds all the controls, while the lower one sits horizontally and holds all the valve bases. Access to the valves is easier than some older Voxes: a wooden panel on the underside fastened by woodscrews is all that needs to be removed to get to the 12AX7s and EL84s (two in the AC15 and four in the AC30). The wiring

is neat, the soldering is clean and bright, and both amps look ready to take on the world.

The AC15 head is slightly shorter than the AC30, with fewer controls and input sockets. There's a pair of jacks for the normal and top boost channels; volume for the normal channel; volume, treble and bass, a reverb level control, tremolo speed and depth, and master controls for volume; and the classic Vox Tone Cut, which acts as a global tone control and works in the opposite way to what you might expect. The AC30's extended control panel offers high- and low-sensitivity input jacks for both channels, a reverb tone control and separate LEDs for mains and standby.

The rear panels on both amps are practically identical, with a pair of speaker outlets, a footswitch jack and a chickenhead knob operating a rotary switch that controls the Vox Reactive Attenuator circuit. This reduces the output power in three steps: from 30 watts to 15 to one third of a watt on the AC30 head, and from 15 watts to seven to one fifth of a watt for the AC15. Overall, both amps are well built and look the part, especially when sat on top of Vox's matching 2x12 enclosure. The AC30 head also benefits from an effects loop with switchable levels to accommodate rack and stompbox effects.



1. The Tone Cut control is peculiar to Vox amps. It operates on the output stage (not the preamp) and works back to front, decreasing highs as it's turned clockwise. Both the AC15 and AC30 Custom heads feature built-in tremolo, with variable speed and depth controls



2. The AC30 Custom head has a slightly stretched control panel, which benefits, among other things, from high- and low-sensitivity input jacks for both panels

Feel & Sounds

When discussing the ‘Vox sound’, we often hear the words ‘chime’ and ‘jangle’, which may give the impression that AC models are thin and trebly, when in fact both heads have a distinct midrange emphasis. That chime and jangle is still there and comes into its own for mildly distorted stuff on the top boost channel, but it’s the smooth, warm mids that are as much a part of the Vox character as its complex high frequency response. This is accentuated by the Celestion-loaded V212C open-back cabinet, which is perfect for delivering the articulate pop-rock chord and solo stuff that both Vox heads really excel at producing.

As you might expect, both amps sound very similar; the only real differences come from an increase in clean headroom on the AC30, together with the ability to vary the tone of the spring reverb. At cleaner settings, with a lot of reverb and a decent tape echo emulation in the AC30’s effects loop, it’s easy to nail practically any classic 60s British pop tone, from The Beatles and The Shads, to The Hollies and The Kinks.

Crank up both amps, and you’re in a thick soup of harmonic-laden overdrive that’s as relevant to today’s indie bands as it was to the British Invasion back in the mid-60s. It’s a particularly vocal overdrive with just a hint of fuzz that sounds equally toothsome with single coils or humbuckers, and fully





3. The Reactive Attenuator feature is on both heads and offers three switchable output levels. On the AC30CH it switches from 30/3/0.3 watts; on the AC15 it switches from 15/1.5/0.2 watts

maxed out you can get that boxy midrange grind that typifies Queen's wall of sound. Power-wise, the AC15 head combined with its matching 2x12 enclosure is plenty loud enough for most pub gigs, although there's not quite enough clean headroom for stuff that demands it, like country picking or funk. For that, you need the extra headroom that a quartet of EL84s brings.

Getting a half-decent cranked up sound at home or in the studio would be more difficult as both amps are very loud, but thanks to the new Reactive Attenuator, it's wonderfully simple: just flip the rear panel switch to its lowest setting and enjoy the fully-cranked effect at conversation levels.

Verdict

Both the AC15 and AC30 heads are worthy additions to the Vox Custom range. While combos are often considered more portable, an AC30 is a weighty beast to cart around. Separating the amp and speakers makes this job easier, while adding a degree of flexibility – you can use any available speaker cabinet, although there's no doubt that visually and sonically, the specially designed V212C enclosure is the perfect companion. The new Reactive Attenuator circuit is a great addition and makes both heads ideal for stage, studio and home use.

Intended for serious Vox enthusiasts at all levels, these Custom heads are relatively affordable and just as relevant today as the originals were 50 years ago. **G**



VOX AC15 CUSTOM HEAD

PRICE: £586

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Valve preamp and valve power amp

OUTPUT: 15W RMS, switchable to 7W or 0.2W

VALVES: 4x 12AX7, 2x EL84

DIMENSIONS: 284 (h) x 610 (w) x 266 (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 15.3/34

CABINET: Ply

CHANNELS: 2, non-footswitchable

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

FOOTSWITCH: 2x button switch switches tremolo, reverb

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Reactive Attenuator circuit allows full tone at low volume settings

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Along with the AC30CH (right), the matching 2x12 G12-M speaker cab costs £442

Vox Amplification

01908 304600

www.voxamps.com

7/10

PROS Plenty of tonal range available from the two channels; a decent tremolo effect

CONS Price arguably only reason to buy this over the AC30; shame the two channels can't be footswitched



VOX AC30 CUSTOM HEAD

PRICE: £838

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Valve preamp and valve power amp

OUTPUT: 30W RMS, switchable to 15W or 0.3W

VALVES: 4x 12AX7, 4x EL84

DIMENSIONS: 284 (h) x 705 (w) x 266mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 19/42

CABINET: Ply

CHANNELS: 2, non-footswitchable.

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

FOOTSWITCH: 2-button switch switches tremolo, reverb

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Reactive Attenuator circuit allows full tone at low volume settings, series effects loop with true bypass

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: See AC15CH

8/10

PROS Great range of classic Brit clean and overdrive tones; nice reverb; very loud

CONS Annoying that the effects loop can't be footswitched, along with the channels