



FIRST PLAY



MESA ENGINEERING
TRIPLE CROWN TC-50 HEAD
£2,450

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WHAT IS IT? The latest release from the Californian inventors of high-gain amplification, which uses EL34 power valves instead of Mesa's usual 6L6 output stage

Crowning Glory

Mesa's latest high-gain monster, the TC-50, stakes its claim for rock royalty alongside the Mark Series and Dual Rectifier

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Neil Godwin

Depending on your generation, Mesa Engineering means one of two things. It's either the company that invented high gain in the early 1970s, in the shape of the small but outrageously versatile Mark Series Boogie amplifier, or the company that redefined the sound of modern rock and metal in the early 1990s with the all-powerful Dual Rectifier. With such a track record for genre-changing products, any new amp from Mesa is important. One of the world's biggest users of the 6L6 output valve, Mesa has experimented with the EL34 before. Now, there's an amp in the catalogue that might just alter rock guitar history for the third time and, again, it uses EL34 valves. Welcome to the all-new Triple Crown TC-50 head.

Like all Mesa products, the Triple Crown is beautifully designed, with a fine degree of attention to detail. Mesa routinely takes what is essentially a boring black box and turns it into a thing of beauty. Check out the pleasing proportions, recessed die-cast badge and perfectly seated piping of this head cabinet, which is fabricated in Mesa's own Petaluma cabinet shop using state-of-the-art CNC equipment. Inside the chassis, the electronics

are mostly contained on one very high-quality double-sided printed circuit board. The layout is super clean and precise with some typically Mesa routing quirks, evolved over many thousands of hours of R&D. Wiring, soldering and chassis finish are impeccable, as you'd expect with Mesa's pedigree.

The Triple Crown TC-50 is a three-channel amp, with independent preamps covering clean, low-gain and high-gain ranges. The front panel may look a little daunting at first, but is actually quite easy to navigate, with three identical sets of controls including gain, master volume, bass, mid, treble and presence, together with a two-way toggle switch that changes the channel gain and voice. There's a small toggle switch for manual channel changing, and a pair of master output level controls, one of which is footswitchable.

The feature-rich rear panel includes Mesa's exceptional CabClone speaker-emulated output, with a balanced XLR, headphones socket and line out. There's also a standard line out jack, plus ground lift and cab voicing toggle switches. The TC-50 also benefits from a footswitchable effects loop, separate reverb level controls for each channel, and MIDI switching for all the major functions. Die-hard 6L6 fans will be pleased to see that the TC-50 also has a bias switch to allow both output valve types to be used, as well as accepting 6V6s for a low-power option.

Feel & Sounds

The TC-50 powers up cleanly and smoothly with practically zero hum and hiss, a sure sign of a well-sorted circuit. The Triple Crown's clean channel is highly versatile, going from butter-sweet clarity through to edgy blues



solos, with a lot of control over that 'just on the edge' sweet spot, making it easy to dial in any guitar for the perfect response. We love the drive option on this channel, which adds a subtle mid-boost together with a touch of compression, for a very touch-sensitive vocal solo tone that's equally flattering for single coils and humbuckers.

The Lo Gain channel is where the TC-50's crunch and classic rock tones live. Here, we're on familiar Mesa ground, with a multi-layered overdrive and harmonic overtones that shift with varying degrees of pick attack. Flipping the toggle switch into Drive mode adds a subtle midrange bump, invoking JCM800-approved snarl and a dose of extra gain. The

1. The busy control panel is quite easy to navigate when you get used to it, although the writing is hard to make out. Each channel has an identical array of knobs, plus one voicing switch





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2 The TC-50 has a built-in CabClone circuit with a balanced DI output and very realistic speaker simulation

3. There are two global master volumes; the Solo control is also switchable so you can use any sound for rhythm and lead

4. The head comes equipped with a pair of EL34 output valves – you can swap these for 6V6s and drop the output down to around 20 watts, or you can flip the bias switch and use 6L6s for the traditional warmer bass and rounder treble response that Boogie amps are known for



MESA ENGINEERING TRIPLE CROWN TC-50 HEAD

PRICE: £2,450

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All valve preamp and power amp

OUTPUT: 50W RMS

VALVES: 6x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7, 2x EL34

DIMENSIONS: 245 (h) x 580 (w) x 265mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 16/35

CABINET: Ply

CHANNELS: 3

CONTROLS: Channels: Bass, mid, treble, presence, gain, reverb level, master x3. Hi Gain channel tight/normal mode switch, Lo Gain channel tight/normal mode switch, clean channel normal/drive mode switch. Master output/solo level

FOOTSWITCH: Triple Crown foot controller (supplied) toggles channels, FX loop, reverb and solo functions

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Footswitchable series effects loop, built-in CabClone DI with speaker emulation, balanced XLR out, headphones output, speaker defeat and ground lift. MIDI switching

OPTIONS: A range of custom finishes is available, contact distributor for details

RANGE OPTIONS: Rackmount head version (£2,450); 1x12 combo version (£2,750). The 2x12 horizontal Rectifier cab, as featured, costs £895

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PROS Tight articulation and snappy bass attack; exceptional tone from all three channels

CONS The control panel lettering is hard to read; it's expensive, but this is Mesa – you get what you pay for



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Hi Gain channel adds more of the same – lots more, so much so that in the upper reaches we think this is probably the most gain ever from a Mesa amp, and pushed to excess it gets a little mushy. However, flip the channel into Tight mode and the articulation and focus return, with a devastatingly fast attack that's perfect for chopped metal chord riffs.

Verdict

No doubt about it, the Triple Crown has three channels packed full of world-class tone that only a handful of amps can compete with. Add a superlative reverb, valve-buffered effects loop, MIDI switching and Mesa's amazing CabClone circuit, and its lofty price tag becomes somewhat easier to justify. We set the bar higher for Mesa's amps, because they promise so much, so it's great to confirm that the Triple Crown delivers on all counts. Yes, the price may be a bitter pill to swallow, but once you've played through one for a few minutes it becomes remarkably sweeter. **G**

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