

VOX AC30VR & AC15VR £469 & £305  
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSE WILD



## Vox AC30VR & AC15VR

£469 & £305

Two contemporary versions of the classic AC30 and 15, featuring Valve Reactor technology in place of a genuine EL84-fuelled power section *by Simon Bradley*

In last month's issue we checked out the results of Vox's impressive attempt to offer all-valve AC Series combos at affordable prices, and we felt that they were the most practical versions we'd played for a long time.

These two latest combos sit smack between the AC Series and the similarly successful Valvetronix range in the Vox canon and mix a genuine valve preamp with a power section that utilises the Valve Reactor circuitry – an innovation that deserves its place amongst the very best of modern emulation.

Hybrid amps still divide opinion and there's little doubt that an all-valve amp with its power section revving away gives the tone and, just as importantly, playing experience that most of us prefer. Of course, all-valve amps are invariably more expensive than their hybrid or wholly solid-state counterparts; they're also weightier and (whisper it) more susceptible to developing faults too. So any amp that mixes a real valve with 'cold', 'hard' circuits does have several high marks to live

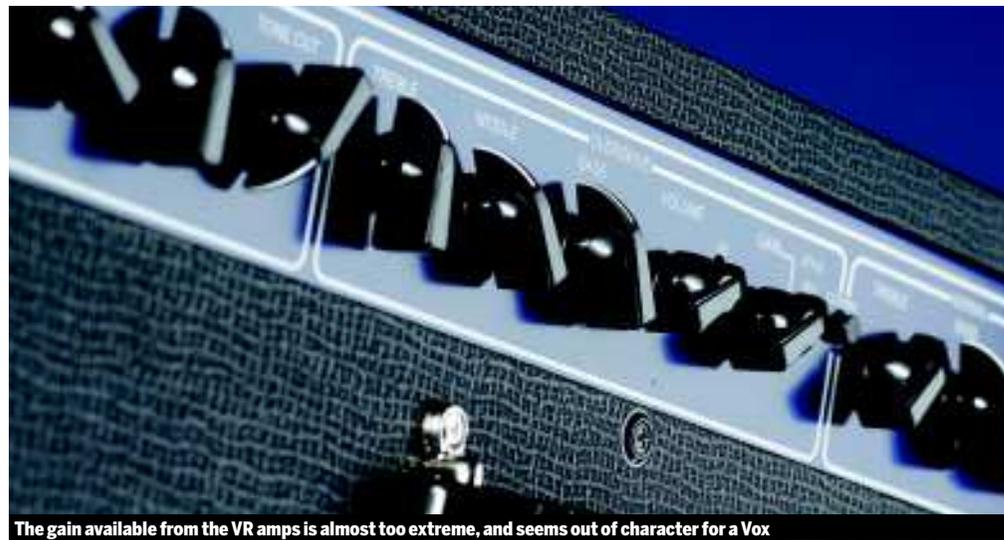
up to and we'll be comparing these two VR amps tonally with the AC combos we were so impressed with last issue.

### AC30VR

Looking at the amp front-on, the classic livery of brown

diamond-pattern cloth, white piping and gold Vox logo could fool your adoring fans into believing that you're playing through a pukka AC30. Indeed, to a lot of people, mimicking the look of a classic amp is almost as important as recreating its tone,

The classic livery could certainly fool your adoring fans into believing you're playing through a genuine AC30



The gain available from the VR amps is almost too extreme, and seems out of character for a Vox

but with the VR Series' more modern tonal leaning, should the aesthetics move on too?

Closer inspection reveals the disparities, not least the provision of a royal blue front panel bearing white lettering and outlines. It's also possible to pick the amp up with one hand, a feat we'd certainly dissuade anyone short of a Grecian hero attempting with the now discontinued AC30H2.

The amp is configured with two independent channels linked to a master section that also includes a Tone Cut control. One traditional feature missing here is the legendary Top Boost circuitry, although this has been replaced by a switchable gain that offers two distinct styles. These are applicable to the overdrive channel only and are, sadly, not footswitchable; only the channels themselves and the reverb can be toggled via the optional VFS2 pedal. To aid the tone still further, the OD channel also features a middle EQ pot to supplement the usual

### The Rivals

#### Vox AC30VR

The **Kustom HV30T** (£429) mixes 12AX7 tubes with a solid-state power amp and also has 24-bit digital effects: it's ultra high-gain too. The new solid-state **Orange PiX Crush 35LDX** (£191) mixes heritage with good looks, an impressive choice of effects and an excellent tone.



bass and treble controls. The other feature to fall by the wayside is the gorgeously soupy onboard tremolo. The oldest guitar effect of all, its omission – from both a cost and practical point of view – is perhaps understandable on a more modern-minded combo.

With a single guitar input rather than the two pairs of two, and rated, of course, at 30 watts RMS, the roar comes from a pair of custom-designed Celestion VX 12-inch speakers. There's no mention of an optional upgrade to Celestion Alnico Blues (as would normally be the case with an AC30), and that makes perfect sense: they're eye-wateringly expensive and have no place in a value-conscious amp.

The back panel features the footswitch socket, plus an external speaker output that mutes the internal Celestions when connected; use it for recording, or perhaps to run the amp through a different cab.

### AC15VR

It'll come as no surprise that the AC15VR is a smaller, stripped-down version of the 30VR but, as any Vox historian will tell

you, the 15-watters enjoy their own legacy, not to mention unique tone and applications.

Also equipped with two channels, the front panel offers fewer controls. Both share treble and bass pots as well as the master volume and reverb section, although gone is the Tone Cut function. The OD channel continues to provide two button-selectable gain

### The Rivals

#### Vox AC15VR

The **Orange Crush 15R** is a good option, rated at 15 watts, while the solid-state **Laney LG20R** is an old-school combo for a new era that sounds splendid. For genuine value, try the **Peavey Solo** (£61): the company's TransTube circuitry sounds far better here than you'd have any right to expect.



One traditional feature missing here is the legendary Top Boost circuitry, although this has been replaced by a switchable gain that offers two distinct styles



The white-on-blue control panel sets the VR amps apart from their all-valve brethren



styles, as described above, and the closed back cabinet – the 30 is a half-back – conceals a single Celestion VX 12-inch.

At just 16 kg it's very easy to move around and, again, the external speaker out does allow you to increase its projection (but not output, of course) by running it through a larger cab.

### Sounds

Both amps here cover most traditional tonal bases, spanning decent cleans, through to overdrives and on to full-on distortions.

Using the normal channel and setting the volume up around eight, the amp does give a reasonably fulsome bark that's especially usable with a Strat's neck pickup. Clean, both amps do well enough, with the AC30's duo of speakers helping with the spread.

The AC15 gives a classic boxy tone, but there's limited 'chime' on offer which, given Vox's tonal heritage, we were a little disappointed with. The digital reverb doesn't do much to sweeten proceedings either, sounding artificial to our ears.

That said, there's more than enough headroom on offer here from the 30, and the balancing act between the channel and master volumes is a skill well worth learning in order to get as clean a tone as at high a volume as possible.

The AC30's OD channel's two styles are widely different in character, with OD1 giving enough fur to suggest use as a solo tone to complement a cleaner rhythm sound. OD2 offers a high-octane cascading-gain that's never been a part of an AC Series amp's arsenal. Back to those aesthetics: we wonder if Vox is cutting off a slice of potential market here – it can sound 'heavy rock', but it really doesn't look it.

No matter, as whacking the OD channel's volume and gain pots all the way and setting the Tone Cut to just under half, you can get a passable Brian May tone when using a reasonably powerful bridge humbucker. It's certainly thick enough, with sufficient preamp treble to cut, but lacks the clarity and articulation of which the Queen guitarist is so fond.

Anything else? There's a slight but discernible pause

between tones when changing channels on both amps, and we couldn't help wishing that, as this is a modern slant on a classic design amp, there was an effects loop, especially on the AC30VR. Oh, and there are still no footswitches included.

### Verdict

After being blown away by the AC Custom Series last month, we're feeling less warm to these VR amps. With such a clearly defined visual promise, to our ears there's not enough classic Vox character on offer, which may end up pushing both combos in with the rest of the hybrid market, where the competition's more modern styling and features are very powerful sales tools.

That said, there are plenty of people out there who want a simple but classic looking amp, but without all the hassle of presets and programming, and without the cost, weight and maintenance issues of an all-valve amp. Whether those people want a full-on fire-breathing overdrive channel is open to debate. Still, these are competitively priced amps and, as ever, certainly look the part. If you're not into the cost of a full-on AC30C2 or AC15C1, these will get you into the Vox ballpark and then some, thanks to that OD channel. **G**

### The Bottom Line

#### Vox AC30VR

**We like:** Classic livery  
**We dislike:** Pause when changing channels; no tremolo; no effects loop  
**Guitarist says:** There's nothing cataclysmically wrong here, but it could have been so much more, which is a shame

#### Vox AC15VR

**We like:** Lightweight; the cool boxy tone from the Normal channel  
**We dislike:** Pause when changing channels; overly artificial character to reverb  
**Guitarist says:** May well be overlooked in the already overcrowded amp market at this price point



### Vox AC30VR

**PRICE:** £469  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Hybrid twin-channel 2 x 12 combo  
**OUTPUT:** 30W RMS  
**DIMENSIONS:** 702(w) x 265 (d) x 556 mm (h)  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 23/50.7  
**CABINET:** 20mm particleboard  
**VALVES:** Single 12AX7  
**SPEAKERS:** Two Celestion VX12 12-inch  
**CHANNELS:** Two  
**CONTROLS:** Volume, treble and bass (normal channel); volume, gain, treble, middle and bass plus OD1/OD2 selector button (overdrive channel); master volume, reverb and tone cut  
**FOOTSWITCH:** Vox VFS2 (£32) – sold separately  
**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Footswitch and external speaker outputs  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Vox AC30C2 (£822), Valvetronix VT30 (£176)  
**Korg UK**  
**01908 857100**  
**www.voxamps.com**

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Vox AC15VR

**PRICE:** £305  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Hybrid twin-channel 1 x 12 combo  
**OUTPUT:** 15W RMS  
**DIMENSIONS:** 602(w) x 265 (d) x 456 mm (h)  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 16.4/36.2  
**CABINET:** 14mm particleboard  
**VALVES:** Single 12AX7  
**SPEAKERS:** Single Celestion VX12 12-inch  
**CHANNELS:** Two  
**CONTROLS:** Master volume and reverb, plus global treble and bass controls; volume, gain and OD1/OD2 selector button (overdrive channel); volume (normal channel)  
**FOOTSWITCH:** Vox VFS2 (£32) – sold separately  
**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Footswitch and external speaker outputs  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Vox AC15C1 (£528), Valvetronix VT15 (£128.99)

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★