





FIRST PLAY



**HARLEY BENTON  
MIGHTY-15TH HEAD**  
£211

**WHAT IS IT?** A lunchbox-style amp head available exclusively from Thomann, powered by a pair of Ruby EL84Cs and with a 'magic eye' power indicator



# Cheap Lunch

As one of a two-amp range from Harley Benton, this lunchbox-style amp offers boutique valve tone at a budget price. But can it *really* sound any good?

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**P**robably the world's fastest-growing musical instrument brand right now, Harley Benton has already earned a reputation for astonishing quality at hard-to-beat price points. For high-volume manufacturers, you'd think the easy route would be to stick with the simpler manufacturing process and reliability of solid-state amplification. However, Harley Benton has upped the ante somewhat by including some proper all-valve designs in its rapidly expanding catalogue, available exclusively from German retail giant Thomann. Here we're looking at a tempting new addition that's likely to make more than a few waves: Harley Benton's Mighty-15TH head.

The first thing we look for in low-priced valve amps is corner-cutting, so we're pleased to see the Mighty-15TH is built to last, with attention to detail evident in both its design and build. The precision-folded steel case is thicker than some lunchbox-style products we've seen, adding reassuring weight when you pick up the amp by its folding carry

1. The Mighty-15TH features a 6E2 'magic eye' power indicator (an old-school vacuum fluorescent display or VFD for short) to tell you the amp is on and help keep your sound from tipping over the edge. It's not so bright, but it looks cool
2. A Boost switch adds a dose of extra gain and level for a more aggressive feel. As it functions as a character switch, rather than a clean/overdrive choice, the lack of a footswitch is less of an issue
3. The standby switch provides seven- and 15-watt output power options to match home, studio or stage use. Thanks to the exceptionally low noise floor, it's perfect for home recording or internet broadcasting, and sounds superb with pedals
4. Harley Benton is rapidly becoming one of the world's best-known brands for high build quality at almost unheard-of low prices. Its Mighty-15TH offers great tone, pro-standard noise performance and robust build quality



handle. All the case components fit together nicely, with no sharp edges. Meanwhile, the exterior is neatly finished in satin black enamel, and has contrasting silver paint for the front and rear grilles, and white lettering for the control panel.

Inside the chassis, most of the electronics sit on a large decent-quality printed circuit board that's double-sided and through-plated for reliability. This board holds all the front-panel controls and valve sockets, with wired connections to the mains sockets, switches and transformers. The relatively simple circuit leaves plenty of space on the PCB to maximise the layout; the wide tracks and quality components wouldn't be out of place in an amp costing three times as much.

The Mighty-15TH is a no-frills single-channel design, using two 12AX7 preamp valves to drive a pair of Ruby EL84Cs, with no solid-state overdrive assistance. Front-panel controls include Gain and master volume, with a regular passive three-band EQ. There's a Boost switch on the front panel that adds a dose of extra gain and volume, together with a three-position standby switch for full- and half-power output choices.

There's no 'power on' light, but the Mighty-15TH has a trick up its sleeve in the shape of a 6E2 'magic eye' valve, which lights up in fluorescent green. Two small rectangles at the top and bottom of the



display increase in length as the signal gets louder, eventually joining up in the middle of the valve as you play harder. Thankfully, the 6E2 is tied to the Gain knob rather than the master volume, so you can see full deflection without rattling the windows. Dating back to the 1950s, many thousands of magic eye valves (more accurately described as vacuum fluorescent displays) were used as indicators in radiograms and portable reel-to-reel tape recorders. They found their way into guitar amplifiers, too, most notably early 60s crocodile-era Selmers including the Concord, Zodiac and Thunderbird, where the eye pulsed in time with the tremolo effect. On the Harley Benton, it adds a hint of vintage style, although as a 'power on' indicator it's not so practical because the display isn't

particularly bright. Overall, though, the Mighty-15TH exudes impressively solid, reliable quality that's way above what we'd expect at this price point.

### Feel & Sounds

We tried out the Mighty-15TH with our usual complement of guitars, including a Les Paul fitted with a pair of old PAFs and a Strat loaded with lowish-output Duncan Alnico Pros. Sound reinforcement was courtesy of an open-backed cabinet loaded with a pair of Celestion Vintage 30s – standard equipment for many amps over the years and a useful benchmark.

The first thing to impress us was the almost total lack of hiss and hum, making it difficult to tell whether the amp was on or off. Sonically, the Mighty-15TH





Three fixed impedance output jacks cover most common speaker impedance needs, from single speaker extensions to dual 4x12 cabinets. The Mighty-15TH isn't particularly fussy about speaker types and provides great tone when teamed with a wide range of guitar drivers

is surprisingly close to a 6V6-powered Californian tweed, with pleasantly balanced cleans, enhanced by sparkling highs that stay easy on the ear even at higher volume levels. The midrange isn't quite as full-on as, say, a tweed Champ or Deluxe, while the bass is tight and well defined. For both our guitars, the best tonal balance was with all three tone controls near the centre of their travel, using just small nudges to trim the treble and midrange to taste.

The amp's best clean sounds happen with the Gain control set around a third into its travel, shifting into bluesy mild overdrive effects at the halfway mark, with more than enough gain for a ZZ Top-inspired growl with the Gain knob maxed out. While the Boost function adds extra gain and level, it's in huge amounts. Still, it's a useful character switch for more aggressive playing styles. With just two preamp gain stages the overdrive sounds are open and responsive, best suited to blues and classic rock, rather than metal. There's plenty of volume on tap,

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even in the lower seven-watt output mode, while selecting the 15-watt option provides plenty of headroom for cleaner sounds and pedals, with which the Mighty-15TH excels.

### Verdict

We've had a lot of fun with this amp. The impressive build quality and exceptional low-noise performance team up with a lively, open-sounding voice that lets the guitar's character through, producing sweet tweed-inspired overdrive tones to delight beginners and experienced players alike. This amp sounds great on its own or with pedals, something that's often the case with simpler valve circuits, while the popular seven/15-watt output is ideal for studio and home use, with power to spare for most live gigs.

We'd like to see a couple of 'on' and 'off' labels added to the front-panel silk screen for the Boost and mains power switches, together with a nice bright 'on' LED or neon indicator, but that's really all we can come up with in the way of criticism here. Okay, there's no padded gigbag, no effects loop and no footswitch for the Boost function. However, we commenced our Mighty-15TH review thinking that £399 would be pretty good value, so to buy it for almost half that price including VAT and free delivery is probably the amp bargain of the decade. Check it out now! 📺



## HARLEY BENTON MIGHTY-15TH HEAD

**PRICE:** £211

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** Valve preamp and valve power amp

**OUTPUT:** 15W RMS, switchable to 7W RMS

**VALVES:** 2x 12AX7, 2x EL84C, 1x 6E2

**DIMENSIONS:** 330 (w) x 162 (h) x 146mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 6/13

**CABINET:** Steel

**CHANNELS:** 1

**CONTROLS:** Gain, bass, mid, treble, master volume, boost switch

**FOOTSWITCH:** No

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Power reduction switch drops output from 15W to approx. 7W, front-panel boost switch, 3x speaker output jacks

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The 5W

Mighty-5TH head is £119

[www.thomann.de](http://www.thomann.de)

[www.harleybenton.com](http://www.harleybenton.com)



9/10

**PROS** Exceptional low-noise performance; range of clean and overdriven sounds; sweet EQ flatters humbuckers and single coils

**CONS** While we'd like a proper 'on' light and a gigbag, at this price it's practically impossible to criticise