

MESA/BOOGIE MARK FIVE £2,649
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP SOWELS

Mesa/Boogie Mark Five

£2,649

The product of 40 years' experience, Mesa unveils its all-singing, all-dancing Mark Five. How much more Boogie could you possibly want? *by Mick Taylor*

For those who came to the electric guitar any time after 1990, chances are that the name Mesa/Boogie will conjure thoughts of towering Dual and Triple Rectifier stacks – the amps that became the industry standard for hard rock and metal. Rewind another 20 years, however, and Boogie main-man Randall Smith was making his name modding Fender Princetons into the world's first high-power 1 x 12 combos. The original Mesa-branded, snakeskin-vinyl Mark I debuted in 1972, starting a family line that finds itself here in 2009: the Mark Five.

Smith and his team have introduced some killer features over the years. From things we now take for granted, such as channel switching, through to channel-assignable power settings with valve or solid-state rectification. The goal of the Mark Series in particular has always been to offer a wide range of tones in a single amplifier. And boy does this do that.

The Mark Five is laid out logically, with each of the three channels getting the same complement of controls. Rotaries cover the basics of gain, master, bass, middle, treble and presence, while the

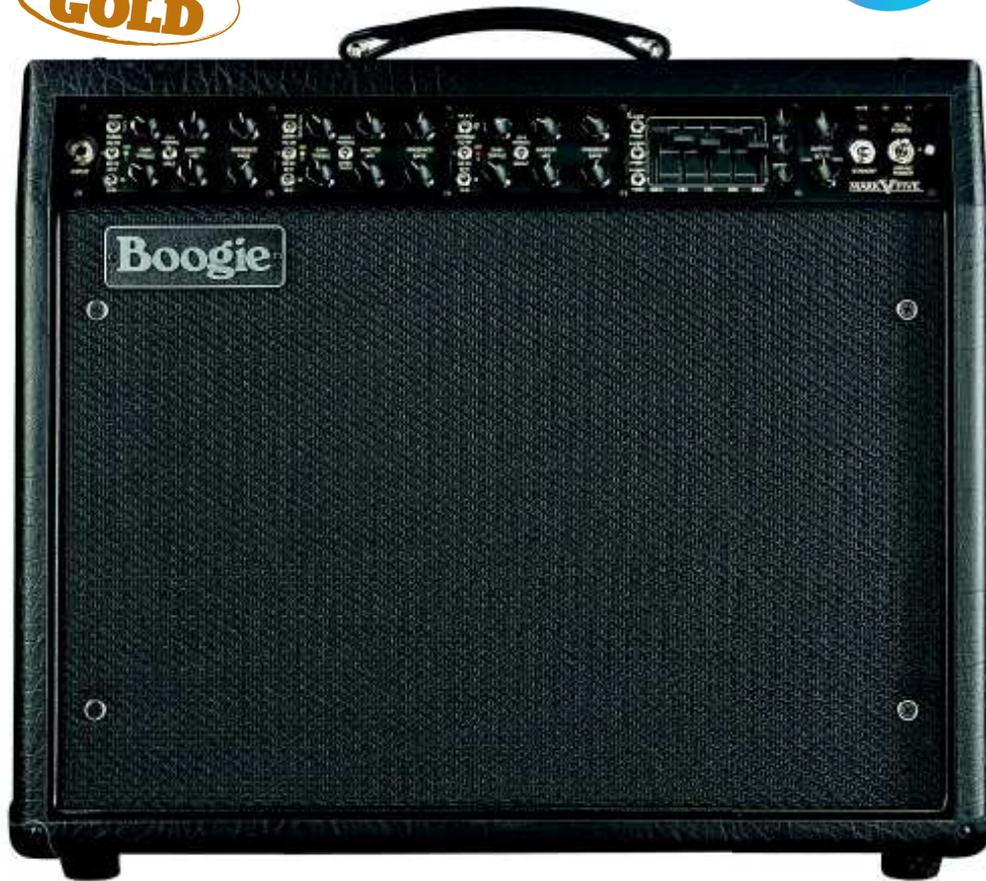
first of the mini toggle switches determines its respective channel's mode. Channel one offers 'clean', 'fat' and 'tweed' modes; channel two has 'edge', 'crunch' and 'Mark I'; while channel three has 'MKIIC+', 'MKIV' and 'extreme'. The channels are footswitchable, but the individual modes within them aren't. The gain and tone characteristics of each mode are so different, they're more about setting up the core tone of each channel, rather than tap-dancing within it.

Each channel has an additional voicing switch: channel one has normal/bold, which works across all modes

and equates to a lighter and more bouncy feel, or slightly thicker with more punch. In channel two you have normal/thick, which works in Mark I mode only and adds mid-range punch and gain; it's useful for fattening out single-coils, but this reviewer has come to think of it more as the 'Santana switch'. Moving to channel three, the switch works across

The Rivals

For other high quality, do-it-all amps, **Mesa's** own **Dual Rectifier Roadster** (£2,649) is hard to beat with four channels, multi-modes and all kinds of other goodies. **Hughes & Kettner's** mighty **TriAmp MkII** (£2,295) is an extremely versatile three-channel amp, but it only comes in head format. For a more cost-conscious route to tonal versatility, check out our review of the **Blackstar Series One range** (£849-£1,199) on p112.



The goal of the Mark Series has always been to offer a wide range of tones in one amp. And boy does this do that...

all three modes again; dubbed normal/bright, it adds top-end for cut and definition when using darker sounding guitars and very high-gain sounds.

The single most important 'feel' factor in any amp is the relationship between preamp gain and power-amp saturation, and the Mark Five has a plethora of options to dial the right balance. First and most obvious is the simple master volume set-up: separate gain and master controls to balance pre- and power-amp levels in each channel. Then, by switching in the effects loop on the rear panel, you can take advantage of the additional 'output' and 'solo' master volumes that offer two footswitchable output levels. If you run these lower and the individual channel masters high, you can get an additional level of squash and drive at lower volumes; it feels almost infinitely tweakable, meaning that once you become intimate with the amp you can kiss goodbye to those frustrating too-compressed or

uncomfortably bold moments. When the effects loop is switched out, it's completely hard-bypassed, meaning each channel master is the last stop.

Each channel also has a switchable power output level for 10, 45 or 90 watts; outputs switch automatically when you change channels. The 10-watt mode configures two of the four 6L6 power valves to run in

Class A; 45 watts runs them in class A/B, while 90 watts brings in all four valves for Mesa's Simul-Class operation. It's all about headroom: progressively louder, bolder and with less compression as you up the power. But there's more...

In addition to the three power ratings, you can also operate the whole amp in either full- or Variac-power mode; the latter drops the voltage to make the whole amp hunker down and compress a little more.

Additionally, channel three has a triode/pentode switch, which offers a more spongy or bold attack. And on top of all of

that, you can even choose to have valve rectification in the 45-watt modes of channels one and two. Time for a cup of tea.

You'll notice that imposing five-band graphic EQ to the right of the front panel. It's become a staple of Mark Series amps, known best for the classic 'V' shape beloved of many heavy rockers. As Mesa explains, it comes at the end of the signal chain, so its effect on your sound is huge, and you can use it in two different ways. You can assign the EQ to be switched automatically in or out of any of the channels; you can also switch it in manually via the floorboard. Then, in addition to the five sliders, each channel also has its own preset contour curve, the amount of which you can set via one of the three knobs to the right of the sliders. In each case it's a take on the classic 'V' setting – with boosted trebles and bass for an almost hi-fi-type tone. This means you can have the 'V' shape on the preset curve in channel three, for example, set something entirely different using the sliders for channel two, and leave channel one un-EQ'd – now that's flexible.

One thing that's remarkable about the Mark Five is how quickly and efficiently it switches through extremes of sounds. To switch instantly from a high-headroom clean channel at 90 watts, to a dark and compressed crunchy rhythm sound at 10 watts, to a super-high gain singing lead tone at 45 watts, with the very minimum of switching noise is no mean feat.



The five-band graphic EQ is a Mark Series staple and is pivotal to the Mark Five's tone

While the Mark Five is absolutely stacked with features, not one feels like a marketing gimmick or sales tool: they all have a significant effect on tone and/or functionality

In terms of overall build quality, this is very much modern Mesa: a sturdy birch ply cabinet, high quality leather-look black vinyl, leather corners and a tough mesh front grille. We've waxed lyrical about Mesa's construction standards in many past reviews and this upholds the reputation proudly. Some amp buffs might turn their noses up at the custom PCB construction within, but again, as many amp designers will agree, the benefits of this kind of construction when done as well as this are obvious – uniformity and the potential to include extensive features. This particular amp buff would like a big old jewel light instead of the somewhat more anodyne little blue power light, but space is at such a premium inside the chassis that it's hard to see how one would fit! One practicality

moan is that it's all but impossible to remove the footswitch from its pouch inside the rear panel due to the metal guard protecting the valves. The guard is there for safety, of course, but four screws later many players may never bother to re-fit it.

On top of all this, there's the parallel effects loop, multiple speaker outs, independent spring reverb level controls, slave out, tuner out with footswitchable mute and external switching jacks if you choose not to use the included controller. Anything missing? Nothing that's been invented yet, as far as we can tell...

Sounds

Okay, three channels with three modes, multiple power options, EQ, low power modes, flexible master volume controls – it might be easier to talk about

the sounds the Mark Five doesn't have than those it does, so here are some highlights...

Channel one's clean mode at the full 90 watts has plenty of high headroom, deep bass, high treble response synonymous with 6L6 output valves and a relatively powerful, efficient speaker. This is the really clean stuff; big and sparkly, which borders on three-dimensional when treated to some 'V'-shape EQ and reverb. Moving to fat mode makes it slightly more 'Blackface' Fender in character, with more mid-range body and slightly more gain. Even in this second mode of nine you can push the gain and master, switch down the power options and start adding some fur and squash to notes and chords – something that increases further when you add more gain into tweed mode. Switched back up to full power, there's Texas blues response aplenty here, in fact all kinds of fat, rootsy light overdrive tones.

Channel two Brits things up a bit to begin with, while adding a crunchier gain in the first two modes and tightening the bottom end a touch. It seems to suit humbuckers particularly well, with the myriad power options again enabling you to go

from a squashy drive where notes roll into one another and chords bloom with extra harmonics, through to a bold, strident tone that cuts hard and demands you play with more precision. Channel two's jewel, however, is MKI mode – a recreation of the fabled amp complete with its visceral power delivery at 90 watts and harmonically rich distortion. With the 'thick' switch engaged, this is that singing, mid-rich lead tone that sustains forever with mahogany, maple and humbuckers. Whether it sounds exactly like an early Mark I is academic; it certainly has all the right hallmarks and a wonderful feel under the fingers, especially when you crank it up.

Channel three begins with another Mesa legend, the Mark II-C+, which piles on more gain and moves closer to early eighties metal sounds. This is heavily modded Marshall territory, but with more body and bottom-end, courtesy of that powerful EQ and the 6L6 valves, making it good for fusion and technique rock too. It's fun to experiment with the power options to really get it compressing and saturated to melting point.



It's all fairly self explanatory around the back. Some amps don't have this many controls on the front!



The next mode is MKIV, which adds a more polished feel, with even more gain and an all-round modern feel. Then there's extreme mode – here there's more aggression and grind in the mid-range, with immense gain, sustain and articulation for modern metal riffing or cutting leads.

All that, and there's still plenty more in the Mark Five. Its sheer range of clean to dirty sounds, with everything in between, is given full room to flourish with an extremely powerful EQ and versatile power options to get exactly the kind of drive, mid-range character, headroom and dynamics to suit your playing. Better still, those sounds are easier to dial in than on Marks of yore. Loud? Gloriously, and that's when it's at its best.

Verdict

As the original 'boutique' amplifier company, Mesa/Boogie has never been about following trends, but there's no doubt it's started plenty. The Mark Five lands in interesting times, amid a global economic squeeze and a market awash with retro-inspired single-channel new 'boutique' amps. Is it out of step? Vehemently no: there are still many players who are looking for a fully-loaded amp that covers almost every conceivable tonal base. Moreover, while the Mark Five is absolutely stacked with features, not one feels like a marketing gimmick or sales tool – they all have a significant effect on tone and/or functionality – gig it, record it, hell, just look at it all day.

Some knowledge of recent Mesas will help you get to grips with it quickly, none at all will make the journey all the more enlightening. It's nothing short of a remarkable engineering and tonal achievement. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Immense functionality and tonal range; compact design

We dislike: The footswitch is hard to remove

Guitarist says: The ultimate compact yet powerful do-it-all amp



Mesa/Boogie Mark Five

PRICE: £2,649

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All-valve three-channel combo with solid-state and valve rectification

POWER: 10, 45 or 90 watts

VALVES: 7 x ECC83, 4 x 6L6, 1 x 5U4G

CONTROLS: All channels have independent gain, master, presence, treble, mid, bass pots; three-way mode switch, three-way EQ assign switch, three-way power select switch, voicing switch. EQ section has independent mode switches, five sliders, adjustable contour knobs. Master volume, solo volume, full power/Variac power switch. Rear panel has independent channel reverb pots, silicon diode/tube rectifier switch in channels one and two, pentode/triode switch for channel three

SPEAKER: 1 x 12-inch Mesa Black Shadow/Celestion MC90

FOOTSWITCH: Eight-button footswitch (included) for channel changing, solo volume, EQ on/off, reverb on/off, FX loop on/off and tuner mute

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: 2 x 8-ohm, 2 x 4-ohm speaker out, slave output with level control, tuner out, remote switching jacks, parallel effects loop with level control and hard bypass switch, cooling fan on/off switch, bias switch to use either EL34 or 6L6 valves,

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 30/66

DIMENSIONS: 575 (w) x 470 (h) x 290mm (d)

OPTIONS: Custom cabinets and vinyls available – see Mesa/Boogie website for details

RANGE OPTIONS: Mark Five head (£2,499)

Westside Distribution

0141 248 4812

www.mesaboogie.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



The transformer bone's connected to the, output tubes bone, the output tu...

Five For 40

We track down Boogie designer and president Randall Smith...

This is a huge year for Mesa/Boogie. Not only has the company released the long-awaited jewel in the Mark Series crown, but it's also celebrating 40 years in business. From those early high-power combos to the very latest Express and Electra Dyne models, Mesa's commitment to progress and development in guitar amps is plain to see. So, Randall Smith...

When you started with the modded Princetons, did you think where you might be 40 years down the line? What were your goals back then?

"Who would've known, who could've guessed? Actually, there is a thread of continuity, a goal or vision, of 'how to go about it, and how to keep it real' that I've always had faith in. And it's the commitment to build the best musical amplifiers possible and treat each person – customer, employee, supplier – as I'd like to be treated.

"And something else that's been important: keep it small and tight. Don't fall prey to the

siren of money, 'cause it seems to always lead to contamination. You take on 'investors', they give you the bucks – but they're in it for themselves, for Great Big Bucks in return. And they want it quickly. So that pressure leads you to compromise your principles to satisfy their goals. The fun goes away, the products suffer (but there's lots more of them!), the sleepless nights increase... I think it's called 'selling out'. If you're going to do it, take the money and run. Don't look back. But you'd better love being bored, or playing golf (same thing, for me). Anyway, I don't mean to sound preachy 'cause I know I've been super lucky to find a niche I love that's so damn stable. I've always loved music and tube amps and in spite of all the progress over these four decades, things remain basically the same.

"Our goal is to be like the 6L6 itself: first introduced in the 1930s, still unsurpassed for audio in 2009. We've got a long way to go, but we'll still be using those tubes when I'm in my grave! They're that classic."

“It’s got to inspire players, capture the emotion and deliver the soul. That’s the artistry of instrument building”

Presumably you were thinking about the Mark Five as far back as the early 1990s after the Mark IV came out. Was it the success of the Rectifiers that effectively put it on hold?

“The Mark IV was pretty advanced for its time – that’s about 20 years ago. And the Rectifiers did take the focus off Mark Series amplifiers, but the real hold-up was trying to figure out what exactly the Mark Five should be. At least once every year, when all our guys were in town for the NAMM show, we’d have big discussions about the features and sounds: three channels versus four, that kind of thing. We couldn’t decide. But we could decide on some other designs we needed to do, such as the Stiletto or Lone Stars, for example, or the Express Series. The good news was that each of those models added to my inventory of design experience, big time. There are things I’ve learned from each and every amp that made their way into the Five and helped it deliver the goods. The 10-watt, Class A, single-ended power feature is a perfect example. And so are the mid gain tones of channel two, whose circuits were inspired by both the Stiletto and Express.”

You’ve chosen three channels with multiple modes for the Mark Five. Was there a temptation to go down a four-channel route, as you’d done with the Roadster?

“Yes, exactly. I’d drawn at least two complete four-channel circuits, but the Mark Five needs a five-band graphic as part of its lineage and that wouldn’t physically fit on our ‘wide-body’ combo chassis. Actually it took me quite some time to get the proportions right to fit three channels plus the EQ in those four equal-size windows and make it look relaxed and balanced. As usually happens with us, several valid switch features evolved along with the sounds so it’s not as simple as it started out being. But it’s still pretty easy for a player to understand how everything

works. Each channel has the identical knobs and switches so it’s like a single channel amp repeated three times. Plus, each channel has three different stylistic voicings, giving you nine amps in one.”

Was it tough to decide which modes should end up in the Mark Five? Presumably the Mark I and II-C+ modes were no brainers – but how did you settle on the others?

“It started as two modes per channel but, as we brainstormed and fooled around going off on whacky tangents, some unplanned good things happened. Originally there was a mode called Blues, but that one got jacked into a British realm and reappeared as Crunch, and the revised Blues mode evolved into Edge. We studied some great old amps such as [international head of sales] Steve Mueller’s mid-nineties Mark IV and [‘Tone Boy’, R&D man and all-round Boogie

legend] Doug West’s mid-eighties II-C+. Doug was the play-tester during the Mark II-C+ era and literally played every single one of them. He kept eight – that’s right, eight of them, and sold ‘em off one by one down to the one that’s been his sidekick ever since.”

Of all of Mesa’s developments since the early nineties, what’s the one thing that’s included in the Mark Five of which you’re most proud?

“It’s not the one thing, it’s all the things (you are, Jerome). But in all seriousness, it’s the balanced musical tonality across that broad range of modes, including copying those classic tones. That’s the most important part: what it does for the player.

“As far as how it does it, technically, it’s a toss-up between the switchability to that 10-watt single-ended power configuration and the instantly timed mute circuit that momentarily prevents a huge pop from occurring when the entire circuit changes – including power supply voltages – when switching channels. There are nine patents working on the Mark Five. Oh, and the Simul-Class. It’s two different

power-amps working in parallel simultaneously: one is extended Class A for tone while the other is Class AB for horsepower. But a huge part of design is ‘eliminating the objectionable’, as I call it. The bad stuff you don’t see, the pops, the hums, the oscillations that aren’t there, the flames that don’t occur when you fire it up! That sort of thing; reliability, consistency. Then there is tone and the feeling on the strings. And making sure we understand where the magic bits come from so we can repeat it every time. It’s got to inspire the player, capture the emotion and deliver the soul. That part is the artistry of instrument building and it takes diligence, fortitude and a bit of luck. Plus a long tradition starting with the greatest of Fender designs, which all of us amp guys have built upon.”

Is the Mark Five the pinnacle of – perhaps the end of – an era for the Mark Series? Or do you envisage a Mark Six sometime in the future?

“Help me find my crystal ball, and then maybe I can give you an answer! But if the Mark IV is any precedent, then it’ll be at least 20 years!”



Randall Smith designing the layout of the all-new Mark Five amplifier