

VOX HERITAGE AC30HH & V212 £669 & £629  
GUITAR AMPS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS

Guitarist  
**CHOICE**

## Vox Heritage Collection AC30HH & V212 £669 & £629

Vox's latest hand-wired AC30 looks back and forward.  
Far East boutique? You'd better believe it... *by Mick Taylor*

**T**he very term Vox AC30 exists in six-string vernacular as if it were some single, identifiable thing. Yet in reality – just like the Fender Twin – the model has changed wildly over the years with any number of updates, reissues, signature models and more. The result is reverence, folklore and misty eyes aplenty, but also a lot of confusion.

Nearly 50 years since Tom

Jennings and Dick Denney doubled up their AC15 to birth the seminal 30-watter, the AC30's recent development has been largely about recapturing the mid-sixties Top Boost tone, albeit in a package that offers some degree of more modern functionality. The AC30 Custom Classic Series – introduced in 2005 – hammered that particular nail home, but there still remains a demand for a more authentic design at a

reasonable price. Step forward the Heritage Collection...

### AC30HH

Celebrating Vox's 50th Anniversary, the new Heritage Collection amps – topped by this head and 2 x 12 cabinet – boast 'hand-wired' among their feature list. Highly prized among boutique amp fans, this method of construction can be extremely labour intensive and therefore

costly. Thus these new amps are designed in the UK, but built in Vox's Chinese facility, which has proven its worth with the Custom Classic series.

The big news for the Heritage Collection AC30s are the choices for the two channels. Most Vox enthusiasts agree that a mid-sixties Top Boost is the number one AC30 sound, so that is the basis for channel two. Controls are minimal with a single volume pot, the Top Boost bass and treble circuit, plus a pair of inputs for high and low gain.

Channel one, meanwhile, is built on the venerable EF86 preamp valve, a feature of some 1950s Vox amps and repopularised in the 1990s, principally by the droolsome Matchless DC-30. According to many amp designers it's a difficult valve to work with, partly because good new ones are in short supply





and partly because it's a fiesty little blighter electronically. In addition to the single volume pot – gain and master all in one – you have a three-position brilliance switch, a two-position bass shift (more on which in Sounds) and finally the option of running the EF86 valve in triode or pentode mode. The latter offers the full-gain potential with a fatter, juicier response, while triode returns a cleaner sound and more headroom.

The two final features work across both channels. The first is Vox's top cut, which cuts high frequencies after the main preamp sections, and last but not least is a triode/pentode switch for the quartet of EL84 power valves. According to Vox, this drops the power from the full 30 (pentode) to 15 watts in triode, enabling you to squash the power amp a little more at lower volume levels.

Save for a couple of speaker outs, that's it. There's no reverb, no tremolo or vibrato, no effects loop. You don't even get a standby switch – it's automatic.

### V212 Cabinet

From the front, this 2 x 12 extension speaker cabinet could be an AC30 combo: it's pretty much the same box. That means partially open-backed, solidly constructed ply, covered in that evocative blonde vinyl and the unmistakable diamond grille cloth. Finishing touches are white piping, the gold strip and those lovely tan leather handles. With the matching head, it's a tidily built, stunning looking combination. But we've said it before and we'll say it again, the gaudy plastic Vox logo just looks cheap. A cast metal update would do the whole package justice.

Much more importantly, on the

inside is a pair of Celestion Alnico Blue speakers. These are a direct descendant of the sixties' AC30's fabled Blue Bulldog speakers. They're rated at just 15 watts apiece and use an Alnico magnet (most modern speakers have ceramic, and increasingly neodymium, magnets), but at



Controls are simple, and with no master volume you will have to crank it up loud!

### The Rivals

The **Matchless C-30** range (around £2,000 for the HC-30 head) rekindled interest in the EF86 preamp valve and is simply fabulous, albeit hard to find in the UK. The **Bad Cat Hot Cat** (currently £1,699 for the head) follows a similar design and is a great choice. We also rate the **Budda Superdrive II 30** (around £1,199), showing how a well-designed PCB amp can be a tonal match for hand-wiring.

Also look out for the **Blackstar Artisan 30** hand-wired amp (£1,199 for the combo) – review coming next month...

100dB sensitivity you'll have no trouble whatsoever hearing them. These are time proven as a wonderful speaker for vintage-style electric guitar sounds, albeit bladder-worryingly expensive in their British-built reissue form – this cabinet is a full £444 more than a Celestion GSH12-30-loaded V212BN. Tone costs money? Indeed.

### Sounds

Despite the ostensibly spartan control panel, channel one is capable of a wide range of tones and textures from that hoodlum EF86. The high- and low-gain input options are separated by 6dB, so with a Strat's single-coils, for example, the higher gain input feels right: strong and full. If you want clean sounds from humbuckers, it's worth experimenting with the lower gain input. The core tone is open and breathy as you'd expect from Vox; crystalline highs, but with fatter mids and a more furry edge to the drive than the Top Boost



channel. There's no master volume, so if you want drive you have to turn it up; a natural, vintage-flavoured overdrive – there's no modern-style distortion here – sets in around 10 o'clock with the EF86 in pentode mode. With the power amp set to the full 30 watts, we're talking serious volume by now. Flick it to half power and you can enjoy more drive without popping those eardrums; everything smooths off for a rounder, more compressed tone. If you're

mic'ing up, fine, but lead players with a loud drummer will find the low power setting too quiet in a belting band mix. It's great for fat rhythm chording, however.

Still in channel one, the bass shift function tightens the bottom end to remove some of the mud from 'buckers, and is especially welcome at higher volumes where you can lose note definition on low notes and chords. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, the brilliance control replicates the early AC30 'treble' circuit and the

classic 'brilliant' channel respectively. To our ears, position two sounds very thin and brittle, rescued slightly when the whole thing is cranked and driving, but most ordinary rock and roots tones are in position one and 'off'. Given that the top cut control is a very effective presence/high end control, we'd happily sacrifice the brilliance switch function for something else: reverb, maybe?

And all that before we've even plugged in to the Top Boost circuit. Now this is the Vox sound, no question, with those powerful, interactive tone controls; everything at two o'clock or thereabouts with a Strat – it's just pure magic. Perhaps there's something in the simplicity of the circuit, perhaps it's the Blue speakers... whatever it is, it's a fine reinterpretation of that classic sixties sound and as good as we've heard from any new AC30. It's also highly sensitive to picking dynamics – essential for low- and medium-gain players.

### Verdict

Despite the name, the Heritage Collection hand-wired AC30 is definitely not a mere exercise in nostalgia. Lest we forget that high quality, vintage-style valve tones are what underpin the majority of new guitar music in 2007, just as they were back in the late 1950s. With the fabled Top Boost channel on one side and the EF86 preamp on the other, this amp delivers on that score – perhaps the most desirable set of tones yet from a modern AC30.

That does come at the expense of tremolo, reverb, master volume or an effects loop, however. Should you buy one over the Custom Classic series? The EF86 channel will be one major swinging factor, the other will be your preference for a master volume – this amp doesn't do quiet. For rootsy rock and pop it's hard to beat at this price. **G**

### The bottom line

**We like:** Looks wonderful; EF86 channel; good price for the amp

**We dislike:** Cheap looking logo; no reverb; no standby switch

**Guitarist says:** The best new AC30 yet for stripped-down, clean/crunchy goodness



Celestion Alnico Blue speakers: very expensive but very, very lovely

### Watts inside

Nick Guppy casts a tech's eye over the AC30HH

The AC30 Heritage Collection chassis follows the traditional Vox 'L' shape design, with power and rectifier valves sat vertically on the 'foot' of the L between substantial mains and output transformers, while the preamp valves also sit vertically on a small bracket inside the vertical part of the L. Access to preamp circuitry is good, not so to the output stage – if you need to change an EL84 you have to remove the chassis to do it. Layout and component standard is pretty good, with the preamp and power supply circuits built up on hybrid PCB/turret boards – the resistors and capacitors are wired to small nickel silver turrets in traditional fashion, with PCB traces replacing the wire links you'd see on an original Vox. This means that servicing is relatively



The heat shrunk EF86 is for channel one

easy, while the PCB links offer improved reliability and consistency, as well as more freedom in component placement. The EF86 preamp valve is covered in heatshrink, to help reduce microphonic ringing at higher volume. EF86s always were pretty unreliable – like the early EL84 valve they were intended to sit inside radios and record players, not get shaken apart in a guitar amplifier. The heatshrink might reduce cooling a little but this isn't going to be a big problem as the EF86 doesn't get as hot as an EL84. The quality is up there with the rest of the modern Vox range – solid, reliable and value for money.



### Vox Heritage Collection AC30HH

**PRICE:** £669

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** All-valve head with valve rectification

**OUTPUT:** 30W

**VALVES:** Three 12AX7, one EF86 (preamp), four EL84, one GZ34 rectifier (power amp)

**DIMENSIONS:** 297 (h) x 606 (w) x 260mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 20/44.1

**CHANNELS:** Two, non-footswitchable

**CONTROLS:** Channel one: volume, brilliance, bass shift, pentode/triode switch. Channel two: volume, treble, bass. Shared cut control, pentode/triode switch

**FOOTSWITCH:** None

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Two extension speaker jacks

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** AC30H2 2 x 12 combo (£1,299), AC30H2L limited edition combo (£1,835) has oiled mahogany cabinet. Also AC15H1TV combo and head/cab versions

### Vox V212 Cabinet

**PRICE:** £629

**POWER HANDLING:** 30 watts

**LOUDSPEAKERS:** Two Vox-branded 12-inch Celestion Alnico Blue

**DIMENSIONS:** 564 (h) x 695 (w) x 260mm (d)

**CABINET:** Partially open-backed, ply construction

**WEIGHT:** 20/44.1

**OPTIONS:** V212BN (Celestion GSH12-30 speakers) £185

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### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★