



Words Nick Guppy / Photography Neil Godwin

PEDAL-FRIENDLY GIGGING VALVE AMPS

Valve power packs a real punch, even at lower wattages. Here are four pedal-friendly 15-watters you can gig with

You want to gig, but you don't want to break your back or your bank account with a big, heavy stack. You like pedals, and it would be great if you could get a good sound out of an amp without them, if needed. While 15 watts in a solid-state amp is loud enough for home and practise, it won't cut it for live use. Fifteen watts of valve power, on the other hand, is more than enough for the average un-mic'd pub gig with the advantage that, unlike bigger amps, you'll actually be able to get the power valves working properly and enjoy the kind of dynamic response that even the best modelling amps still struggle to duplicate effectively. With modern features like effect loops, speaker emulation and digital reverb, a 15-watt valve combo can be the power behind your pedalboard and a very portable grab-and-go amp for those occasions when all you need is a guitar and a lead. In recent years, mainstream manufacturers have been influenced by boutique trends, as well as the continuing popularity of pedals, resulting in tempting new models that combine really useful features with affordable pricing – here's our pick of the best.

FENDER

BASSBREAKER™



FENDER BASSBREAKER 15 COMBO £619

Fender's alternative mini-powerhouse

So what's the Bassbreaker 15 all about?

It's part of a nine-strong range of 'alternative' amps introduced by Fender in 2016. The Big F departed from its traditional designs and came up with some unique heads and combos that are perfectly in step with the trend towards simpler, non-master volume amps and the boutique pedal boom, which continues unabated today.

Which features make the Bassbreaker 15 special?

The Bassbreaker 15 is a deceptively simple single-channel amp with a very 'boutique' three-stage gain switch that can go from spanky



cleans to bone-crunching distortion, with a highly-usable, medium gain choice in between. There's also a very nice medium-sized hall digital reverb, which is as good as any mid-priced studio effect.

What other features does the Bassbreaker 15 have?

Like all of the amps in the Bassbreaker range, the BB15 is deliberately stripped down to the essentials, for strongly defined tones that are on the same level as many boutique brands. However, you'll be very pleased to hear there's an effects loop and a properly balanced recording output with ground lift and speaker emulation.

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Valve preamp and power amp w/ solid-state rectification

POWER: 15W

KEY FEATURES: 3x 12AX7, 2x EL84, three-stage gain switch, digital reverb, series effects loop, balanced direct recording output with ground lift and optional speaker emulation

CONTACT: Fender
GBI 0845 305 1122
fender.com

BLACKSTAR ARTIST 15 £649

Blackstar's blonde bombshell

What's the Blackstar Artist 15?

It's the smaller of two combos from Blackstar aimed specifically at pedal users. Both are driven by a pair of 6L6s for a big, open tone and feature a pedal-dedicated clean channel and a medium gain drive channel that's perfect for clean-to-crunch tones. The Artist's circuit has been designed for maximum tonal purity and signal integrity.

What's under the hood?

A clever dual-6L6 output stage, linked to an equally nifty preamp that blends valve and solid-state for enhanced tone shaping and



authentic drive sounds with a very natural-sounding digital reverb. The clean channel has volume and tone controls, while the drive channel offers gain, volume, bass, mid and treble, together with Blackstar's ISF control. There are global master volume and reverb level controls, too.

Any other clever stuff?

There's a series effects loop with useful switchable levels and a speaker-emulated line out. The Artist 15's drive channel features Blackstar's patented ISF feature, which continuously varies the channel's EQ response from classic American to British sounds.

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Valve/solid-state preamp, valve power amp and solid-state rectification

POWER: 15W

KEY FEATURES: 2x 12AX7, 2x 6L6, two footswitchable channels, digital reverb, series effects loop with switchable levels

CONTACT: Blackstar Amplification
01604 817817
blackstaramps.com



ORANGE ROCKER 15 1X10 COMBO

£659

Orange's new twist on the Rocker

Tell us all about the Rocker 15...

The Rocker 15 – available as a combo or a newly-launched head – was designed by Orange amp wizard Adrian Emsley, who is well-known for world-beating products like the Tiny Terror. It's a typical, modern Orange amp, with three 12AX7s and one 12AT7 driving a pair of EL84s. It comes in orange vinyl and basket weave cabinet, with a black vinyl option at no extra cost.

What's under the skin?

The Rocker 15 has two footswitchable channels; a normal channel



that features a single volume control and a dirty channel with gain, bass, mid, treble and master volume controls. The dual EL84 output stage drives a single Orange custom-designed Voice Of The World Gold Label 10" loudspeaker.

Any other special features?

The Rocker 15 has a half-power switch as well as a bedroom/headroom attenuator switch. Used together they give four power options, ranging from 15 watts down to 7, 1, and even 0.5 watts. There's no reverb here, but you do get a proper valve-buffered effects loop.

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: All valve preamp and power amp, with solid-state rectification

POWER: 15W, switchable to 7, 1 and 0.5W

KEY FEATURES: 3x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7, 2x EL84. Two footswitchable channels, valve-buffered effects loop, four switchable output power options.

CONTACT: Orange Amplification
0208 905 2828
orangeamps.com



VOX AC15C1 LTD MAROON

£659

Still rocking after 60 years

What's the Vox AC15 all about?

This AC15C1 is the current version of Vox's very first combo, introduced in 1958. The modern circuit uses 12AX7s instead of the troublesome EF86 and includes a spring reverb and a master volume. Vox occasionally release limited editions in custom colours, like this handsome maroon sample.

What do the controls do?

The modern AC15 has two non-switchable channels, called normal and top boost. The normal channel has a single volume control,



while the top boost channel features volume, treble and bass knobs. There's a reverb level knob and speed and depth controls for the built-in tremolo circuit. Both channels feed a master section with a volume control and Vox's legendary 'cut' control, which operates on the power stage and reduces treble as you turn it up, working in the reverse to what you'd expect.

What about other features?

While the modern AC15C1's circuit is quite different, its vintage vibe means there's no effects loop or channel switching, however, you can switch the built-in reverb and tremolo effects.

AT A GLANCE

TYPE: Valve preamp and power amp, w/ solid-state rectification

POWER: 15W

KEY FEATURES: 3x 12AX7, 2x EL84. Two channels with master volume, spring reverb, tremolo

CONTACT: Vox Amplification Limited
01908 304600
voxamps.com



HEAD TO HEAD

Which combo beats the rest for small gigs?

As you'd hope from four of the world's biggest names in amplification, our quartet of combos look the part, and beneath the handsome exteriors they're built to last, with quality components and electronics. Where portability is concerned, Blackstar's Artist 15 is lighter than the Vox AC15 or Fender's Bassbreaker 15, despite its generously-sized cabinet. The Bassbreaker 15 is compact but heavier, due to bigger transformers, while Orange's Rocker 15 is the easiest of all to carry. The Bassbreaker's standby switch is renamed as 'mute' to comply with EU rules and in mute mode, the amp's laser-like white power indicator flashes, which is either useful or disconcerting, depending on your point of view. We'd prefer something non-flashing that's easier on the eye.

The Blackstar Artist 15 is powered by 6L6s, giving it a distinctly different vibe, with a sweet treble and tight bass. Its high-headroom, clean channel, low-gain drive channel and

THE VOX HAS A PUNCHY MIDRANGE AND AGGRESSIVE GRIND WHEN TURNED UP

switchable level effects loop partner perfectly with all kinds of pedals. The other three combos use the popular EL84 mini pentode, yet all have very different characters. The Vox has a punchy midrange and aggressive grind when turned up, while the Orange Rocker's switchable power levels make it easy to achieve a big, cranked tone at low volume. Orange's superb 10" loudspeaker plays a big part in this, trimming treble and bass extremes for a focused tone that sits perfectly in a mix. It's versatile, too, with a big spacious clean tone from that one-control normal channel and classic Orange midrange power from the dirty channel. Fender's Bassbreaker may not have the Orange and Blackstar's channel switching, but it more than makes up for it with a boutique-inspired three position gain switch and ear-popping tone that rivals boutique designs costing four times the price. All four amps have plenty of power to handle gigs, with the AC15C1 and Bassbreaker offering the best clarity and volume.

The Orange Rocker features updated, modern circuitry with a vintage vibe



The Vox AC15 is an updated version of the much-loved 1958 original model



FINAL VERDICT

Choosing the gigging amp for you

While they may have a wattage in common, each amp has its own characteristics. Orange's Rocker 15 is great for live use with those footswitchable clean and dirty channels, but really earns its keep in the studio, where the switchable power levels and superb Orange loudspeaker make it easy to record huge guitar tone with minimum hassle. Despite the upgraded circuit, Vox's AC15C1 hasn't lost any of its vintage mojo and kicks out plenty of power from the legendary

Celestion G12M loudspeaker. Although you can't footswitch channels, it's a great live amp, with or without pedals. Real pedal fanatics need look no further than the Blackstar Artist 15; with bags of clean headroom from both channels and a series loop with switchable levels, the Artist 15 is a great pedalboard partner, for going straight in or using the effects loop.

Fender's Bassbreaker 15 is the wild card in this pack, with a three-stage, boutique-style gain switch that covers everything from

bright punchy cleans to full-on screaming leads. The two lower-gain settings are great with pedals; the medium gain voice is stunning and perfect for bluesy leads and classic rock stuff, cleaning up nicely from the guitar's volume control. The digital reverb is excellent – after hearing it you'll never want to go back to a spring, and with a balanced speaker-emulated direct out, it's perfect for stage or studio. Whichever combo you choose, you're guaranteed great tone and a happy partnership with your pedalboard.

FENDER BASSBREAKER 15 COMBO



SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	USABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

BLACKSTAR ARTIST 15



SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	USABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

ORANGE ROCKER 15 1X10 COMBO



SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	USABILITY	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★

VOX AC15C1 LTD MAROON



SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	USABILITY	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★