

VOX AC4TV £218
AMPS



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All-valve, low-power fun from Vox in a small, affordable package – so what's not to like? *by Mick Taylor*

Back in the fifties, a low-powered amp was all you could have. Then as bigger amps were invented – and you could afford it – you'd trade up. But a powerful amp isn't always the answer: they're too loud for home playing and recording, and with advances in PA and monitoring, a lot of people don't need the sheer stage volume. Cue the recent trend of little amps, first expensive and esoteric, then cheap and Far Eastern.

The Vox AC4TV is one of the latest entrants, resplendent in cream vinyl and vertical diamond grille cloth that borrows stylistically from Vox's

Heritage Series amps, but in fact sits in the new Modern Classic range.

The AC4 name first appeared back in 1961, by which time the cream cloth vinyl had been superseded, as had the 1958-60 TV-style cabinet design. So 2009's AC4 is more an exercise in general vintage aesthetics rather than a specific reissue.

We have a single 12AX7 in the preamp and a lone EL84 class-A power section. Top whack is four watts, while a three-way power attenuator enables you to pare that down to one watt and – wait for it – 0.25 watts! You get volume, tone and a 16-ohm speaker output for a 4 x 12

extension cabinet should you wish, or indeed the matching Vox V112TV 1 x 12.

Amp buffs might sniff at the AC4TV's particleboard cabinet (ply is generally considered better) but it's such a dinky little thing, it doesn't need ply for longevity and it's questionable how much it would 'improve' the tone of such a small, closed-back box. Likewise, corner protectors aren't required, and the retro cream plastic handle could take double the weight.

Inside there's a tiny PCB with both valves on the board, along with the volume and tone pots, and other electronic parts. The two dinky transformers, the

mains switch, IEC inlet and speaker output jacks are mounted directly onto the bent steel chassis. The output power regulator also gets its own little board.

The AC4TV combo comes as standard with a 10-inch custom-designed Celestion

The rivals

Blackstar's HT-5C (£249) is the current class leader in tiny valve amps for its grown-up tone, yet high-school price. Also worth a look is the **Blackheart Little Giant BH5H head and 1 x 12** (£139 & £129) that impressed in issue 310, despite lacking the Blackstar's master volume flexibility, while **Epiphone's stalwart Valve Junior** (£139) is five-watt all-valve simplicity at its most primal: one knob, go!



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VX10 30-watt ferrite-magnet speaker that's rear-mounted to a particleboard baffle.

Sounds

Plug in on the highest power setting, crank it up, and the neighbours will already be banging the walls down. It's too loud for domestic use, but perfect for rehearsals and the studio. There's a slight element of boxiness, as you'd expect from a small cabinet. Its strong mid-range is so much more a part of 'real' rock 'n' roll guitar sounds than many modern bass- and treble-heavy tones, which sound good in isolation yet struggle in a recorded or live band mix. The closed-back, ported baffle design helps keep the low-end tight and focused.

With a vintage-style Strat and the four-watt setting, things stay clean to around 10 o'clock on the volume control, beyond which you veer into a light overdrive that doesn't suffer

from raspy treble. At around two o'clock there's an audible hike in gain and we're into classic rock drive textures that will clean up again if you knock the guitar's volume back. Swap the Strat for a Les Paul Standard and the drive texture thickens and smooths as the mahogany and humbuckers keep a firmer hand over the whole shebang - a thick, satisfying, Bonamassa/Moore-style lead tone when cranked.

Switching down to one watt cuts headroom dramatically, enabling you to achieve drive at lower levels. Down again to 0.25 watts takes that a step further, where you can max the volume and tone for a lovely compressed distortion that just seems to knit everything you're playing together - like a 50-watt Marshall 'Plexi' or an AC30 does when they're blowing your ears out. It's a brilliantly conceived and superbly executed feature.




The teeny, tiny control panel keeps things simple, but it's unmistakably Vox



There's enough variation in the tone control to span dark and muddy through to present and cutting, but definition can be an issue with neck pickups, particularly if the amp is sited in the corner of a room.

Verdict

So cute it hurts and it sounds great for all manner of rock 'n' roll and classic rock tones. It's better than an Epi Valve Junior, but not as full-featured as the Blackstar HT-5, which makes the £219 tag seem about right, albeit still ludicrously cheap for an all-valve amp. If price and portability are paramount, get this, but if you have the extra £126, the head and cab version sounds bigger too. And do make sure you plug into a 4 x 12 just for fun - nobody will believe you that it's just four watts. Practise with it, record with it, or just look at it all day long - what a highly likeable little amp. 

Vox AC4TV

PRICE: £218

ORIGIN: Vietnam

TYPE: All-valve class-A single-channel combo with solid-state rectification

POWER: Four watts

VALVES: 1 x 12AX7, 1 x EL84

CONTROLS: Volume, tone, output level

SPEAKER: 1 x 10-inch 16-ohm Celestion VX10 custom speaker

FOOTSWITCH: N/A

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Four, one or 0.25 watts output levels, external speaker jack

WEIGHT: (kg/lb) 8.9/19.84

DIMENSIONS: 350 (w) x 360 (h) x 210mm (d)

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: AC4TVH (head, £195) and V112TV (1 x 12 cabinet, £149) also available

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The Bottom Line

We like: The looks; ease-of-use; cool tones; big sound; speaker output

We dislike: The head and 1 x 12 version sounds bigger

Guitarist says: Destined to be very popular, the AC4TV is a great, no-nonsense little-big amp choice for anything from rock 'n' roll to classic rock tones

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★