



The classic – some would say iconic – Vox badge and grille cloth is one of the most-recognised backlines in the world



FIRST PLAY



VOX AC15HW60
£2,849

WHAT IS IT? Special repro of the 1957 AC15/4 with Celestion speaker and EZ81 valve rectifier



VOX AC30HW60
£3,749

WHAT IS IT? Scarily expensive repro of the Queen- and Beatles-approved AC30

History Lessons

Possibly Vox's last-ever UK-built, hand-wired combos, these historical machines are the core of so many classic pop and rock sounds

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Neil Godwin

The adjective 'iconic' is often over-used in our industry but few would disagree the gold Vox badge on the front of a diamond grille cloth is one of the great icons of electric guitar and rock music. As you may have read last issue, Vox is arguably the genesis of British rock guitar, and for over 60 years AC15 and AC30 amplifiers have been responsible for creating some of the most inspirational music ever recorded.

Designed by a brilliant team headed up by Dick Denney and Tom Jennings, the 1957 AC15 was Vox's first proper guitar amplifier and proved to be an instant success. The AC30 came slightly later following a request from Hank Marvin for a 'double AC15', so he could hear himself play over hordes of girls screaming for Cliff Richard. Not long after that, Vox did a deal with Beatles manager Brian Epstein and the rest is history... although not all of it good.



1. Built using vintage components for both their look and the authentic 1960s sound they help conjure, the AC15 repro is a tribute and celebration of British amp engineering

2. The AC30 was intended to be 'two AC15s in one', as you can see from the comparative size of the 34kg beast

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Original 1960s components were selected for their appearance as well as performance

Vox's journey took a long and bumpy detour, due to poor business decisions and the departure of Jennings and Denney in the late 1960s. It wasn't until Vox was rescued by its current owner, the Japanese synth and tech giant Korg in 1992, that things began to get better. Manufacturing was quickly moved offshore to keep prices competitive, and has stayed there ever since. Vox's current position as a major global force in musical instrument manufacturing is proof Korg made the right decision, even though purists may have moaned this quintessentially British guitar amp was no longer being made in Britain.

Moan no longer though, because to celebrate Vox's 60th anniversary (and 25 years of Korg's custodianship), Vox has released special limited editions of the AC15 and AC30, hand-wired just like the originals and – possibly for the last time – built in the UK.

Like the originals these amps are heavy, thanks to top-grade birch ply, hefty transformers and exclusive Celestion loudspeakers. The AC15 tips the scales at 24kg, while the AC30 is 34kg – definitely a two-person lift, unless you want to injure yourself. It's not a case of 'never mind the quality, feel the weight' though, as both combos are built to exceptionally high standards. Vox's 1964 time reference for the AC30 is a significant year as this was when the 'Top Boost' add-on unit moved from the back panel and became properly integrated into the circuit. The smooth vinyl, dark grey control panels and Celestion Alnico Silver speakers (made in the UK, specifically for these amps) are just about period-correct too, although we'd prefer to see a copper control panel purely for the visual appeal.

Remove the rear panel and you can see the hand-wired circuit, built up on long, thin strips of paxolin turret boards. Carbon comp resistors and mustard capacitors are carefully positioned and soldered to perfection, with hook-up wires neatly routed and twisted. Some of the original 1960s components were allegedly selected for appearance as well as



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4

performance and there's more than a little of that on these amps, which look the part on the inside as well as the outside.

The AC15 has the EF86 valve, which is a crucial part of its fat, punchy midrange, however, when the original four-input AC30 was introduced the EF86 wasn't immune to the increased vibration and often went microphonic, prompting a change to the all-12AX7 circuit. Both amps use the mixed steel and aluminium 'L'-shaped chassis, which needs to be removed to change valves. Beyond any doubt, they're manufactured to exceptionally high standards, with painstaking accuracy that extends right down to the egg-shaped footswitch that toggles the Vibrato/Tremolo effect.

Feel & Sounds

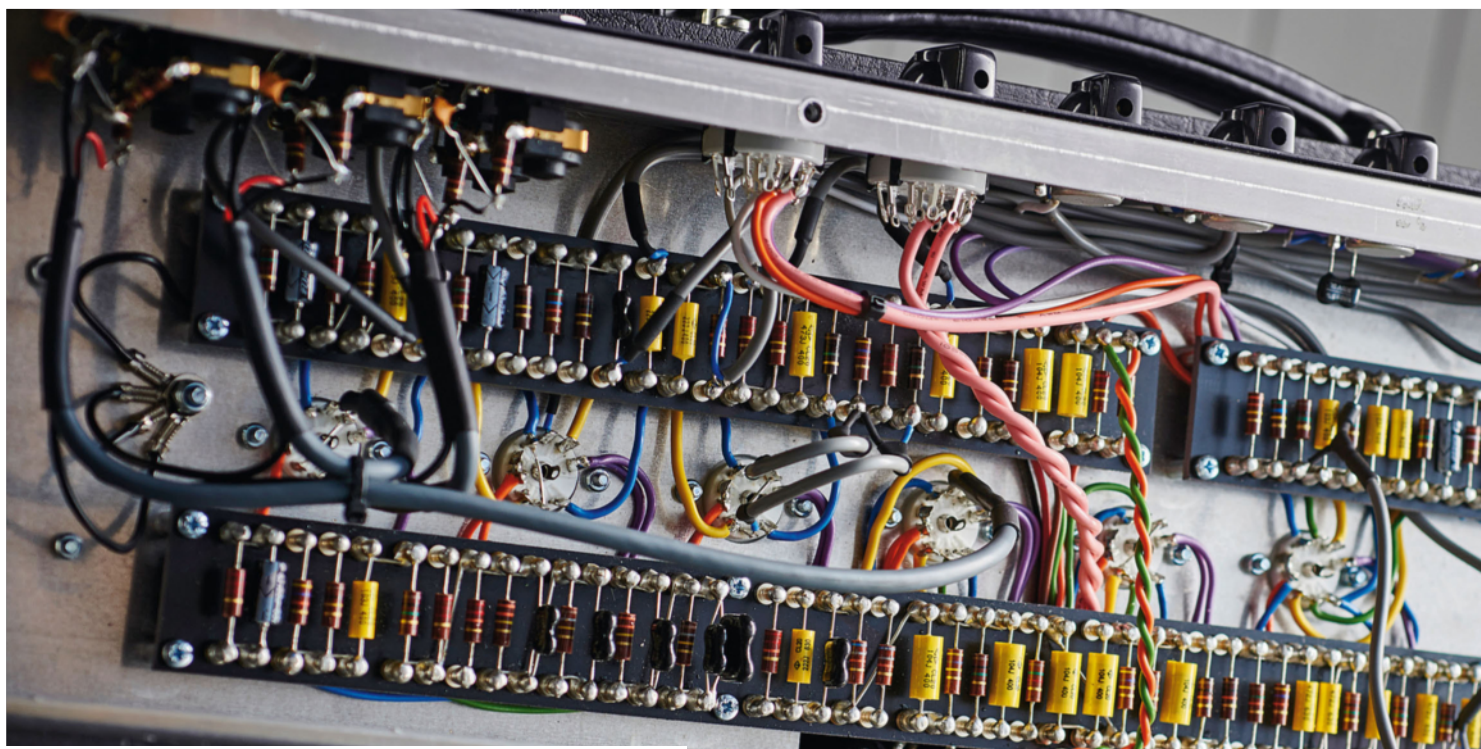
With such attention to detail, you'd expect these amps to sound at least as good as the best AC15 or AC30 you've ever heard, and we certainly think they do. Both combos use valve rectifiers – an EZ81 in the AC15 and a GZ34 in the AC30. They're crucial to the AC's dynamic response, and need a few minutes to warm up

and stabilise before the noise levels reduce and the amps are ready to use. The AC15's EF86-fuelled punchy overdrive and fat midrange is very rewarding, especially with humbuckers, although it needs to be turned up to nearly three quarters to hear those overdriven sounds, at which point it's very loud, much more than you'd think for a cathode-biased 15-watt power stage. It's worth remembering both amps were intended to be as clean as possible, so there's a lot of headroom. At lower levels, we plugged in an Ibanez archtop fitted with tape-wound strings and were rewarded with a chillingly accurate sonic recreation of Vic Flick's Bond theme.

The AC30 is similarly loud when turned up, with a huge variety of tone from its three channels. The Brilliant channel's treble and bass controls give it increased flexibility, flattering single coils and humbuckers, while the backwards Cut control sits in the power amp, reducing highs as the control is turned clockwise. The Vib/Trem channel is where you'll find all the classic early 60s sounds. Two rotary switches toggle the effect between pitch (Vibrato) and amplitude (Tremolo)

3. The AC15HW60 and AC30HW60 use a special Celestion Alnico Silver loudspeaker, made in the UK exclusively for Vox

4. The original egg-shaped footswitch switches the built-in Vib/Trem effect on and off



The medium and fast settings evoke the heady days of original Britpop and Merseybeat

modulation and provide a choice of three speed settings. It may not be authentic, but we'd prefer the slow speed setting to be slower – about half of what it is. The medium and fast settings are just fine, evoking the heady days of original Britpop and Merseybeat.

Every classic AC30 tone you want is here, although there are no concessions to the 21st century; meaning no effects loops, footswitchable channels or boosts. If you want to recreate those classic vintage sounds from the likes of Marvin, Harrison, Gallagher, May and the Edge, you'll need to add some well-chosen effects. A pedal board with a quality analog delay or two, digital reverb and a drive pedal that can work as a clean boost will get you pretty much anything you want; but

major rewards still come from the simplest possible setup of all: guitar, cable and amp. Work with the Vox to discover what that coveted chiming rhythm tone sounds like and you'll find it, just as you'll find the addictively edgy intros to *Paperback Writer*, *Day Tripper* or *Gimme Stitches*, among countless other moments of Vox sonic déjà vu. The exclusive UK-made Celestion Alnico Silver loudspeakers fitted to both combos are superb and will sound even better once the cones have had a few more hours of playtime to loosen up properly.

Verdict

These aren't just guitar amplifiers, they're history machines with period-correct looks, painstakingly authentic construction (as far as modern safety legislation will allow) and above all, sublime authentic tones from those hot, cathode-biased EL84 valves which properly deliver everything you'd expect from an original classic Vox.

5. The EQ and famous Top Boost circuit are located on the top panel, reflecting a spec change made in 1964. Before then the Top Boost was an add-on, installed in the rear panel

6. The hand-wired circuit is built up on turret boards – the traditional British method of amp building. Everything is hand-soldered to an exceptional standard



6

Aimed at serious professionals, dedicated amateurs and hardcore Vox collectors, these 60th anniversary amps may come with eye-watering price tags, but you'd pay seriously big money for original 1964 models of dubious origin and reliability... if you can find them. If you're a player, buying one of the anniversary amps gives you the peace of mind that comes from using reliable, new equipment, while collectors will be happy in the knowledge they'll probably never lose money on their investment. There are luxury heavy-duty slip covers to protect them, as well.

The AC15HW60 and AC30HW60 will only be available during 2017 in limited quantities and after that, well, it's quite possible there will be no more. Ever. These then could be the last hand-wired Vox amps to be made in the UK; they're fitting tributes to the brilliance of Tom Jennings, Dick Denney, Derek Underwood and the Dartford-era team's spirit of innovation, that Korg has safeguarded and built on to create today's modern classics. **G**



VOX AC15HW60 1X12 COMBO

PRICE: £2,849
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All-valve preamp and power amp, with valve rectifier.
OUTPUT: 15 watts RMS
VALVES: 1 x EF86, 3 x 12AX7, 1 x 12AU7, 2 x EL84, 1 x EZ81
DIMENSIONS: 533(w) x 575(h) x 278mm(d)
WEIGHT: (kg/lb): 24/53
CABINET: Birch ply
LOUDSPEAKER: 1 x 12" Celestion Alnico Silver (made in UK)
CHANNELS: Two
CONTROLS: Vib/Trem speed, depth, Normal channel volume, Vib/Trem channel volume, brilliance, cut
FOOTSWITCH: Single button foot switch operates Vib/Trem effect
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: None
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See the AC30HW60

Vox Amplification
01908 304600
www.voxamps.com

7/10

PROS Fat, gainy midrange, the classic EF86 Vox sound, and it's very loud for 15 watts

CONS It's very expensive and quite heavy



VOX AC30HW60 2 X12 COMBO

PRICE: £3,749
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All-valve preamp and power amp, with valve rectifier
OUTPUT: 30 watts RMS
VALVES: 5 x 12AX7, 1 x 12AU7, 4 x EL84, 1 x GZ34
DIMENSIONS: 703(w) x 575(h) x 263mm(d)
WEIGHT: (kg/lb): 34/74
CABINET: Birch ply
LOUDSPEAKER: 2 x 12" Celestion Alnico Silver (made in UK)
CHANNELS: Three, non-footswitchable
CONTROLS: Vib/Trem speed, depth, Normal channel volume, Vib/Trem channel volume, Brilliant volume, treble, bass, cut
FOOTSWITCH: Single button foot switch operates Vib/Trem effect
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: None
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See the AC15HW60

7/10

PROS Perfect replica of a mid-60s AC30 with all the right looks and sounds

CONS No modern features, it's on the heavy side and very expensive