

MESA/BOOGIE EXPRESS PLUS 5:50 & 5:25 COMBOS £1,599 & £1,499
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOBY SESSIONS

Guitarist
CHOICE

Mesa/Boogie Express Plus 5:50 & 5:25 combos

£1,599 & £1,499

Mesa's most affordable grab-and-go tone machines get updated. Need versatility? Here it is *by Chris Vinnicombe*

Mesa/Boogie main man Randall Smith made his bones as David to the heavyweight Goliaths of the amplifier world at the turn of the 70s, and it's fair to say that he knows a thing or two about packing a huge sound into a compact cabinet. Back in 2007, Mesa launched the Express Series, superseding the F Series as the most affordable entry-point in its amplifier catalogue. 2012 saw the company tweak this popular line, and here are the 5:50 and 5:25 combos in their new 'Plus' incarnations.

New to the Plus models is a re-engineered clean mode that incorporates some of Mesa's Lone Star circuitry, and promises both additional sparkle in the high-end and a warmer low-end, with a "significantly better" signal-to-noise ratio. Alongside the original Express models' preset contour controls, which provide a sweep of the company's classic V-shaped EQ, Mesa has added its prized five-band graphic equaliser here, allowing for more detailed fine-tuning. This can be assigned to each channel or bypassed completely if that is your preference. There's also an additional Solo control, enabling a preset master boost to be engaged, to help your lead breaks cut through the mix. An included four-button footswitch gives you on-the-fly access to channel switching, reverb, the five-band EQ and solo boost.

Perhaps the most significant, headline-grabbing feature of these new Plus models is the inclusion of Mesa's patented Multi-Watt channel-assignable power switching, which features 'Duo-Class' technology. In practical terms, this means that each channel

has three independent power settings that alter the output, headroom and dynamic characteristics in the following way: full tilt sees each amplifier operating in push-pull Class AB, with the 5:25 running at 25 watts and the 5:50 kicking out 50. Flip down to 15 watts, or 25 on the 5:50, and the channel in question will run in Class A pentode mode. Both models benefit from a third, five-watt mode that runs one valve (an EL84 in the 5:25 and a 6L6 in the 5:50) in a single-ended, Class A triode configuration.

Although there's no shortage of online pedantry from electronics purists who argue that very few guitar amplifier circuits run in anything like true Class A, the overwhelming majority of prospective buyers of these amps will be interested in whether the sonic and dynamic characteristics cut the mustard for stage and studio use, rather than quibbling about definitions. In the case of both combos here, Mesa has managed to pack a hugely impressive amount of functionality into compact enclosures, with the 19-inch width of the 5:25 proving to be

a comfortable fit on the passenger seat of a small car.

Aside from any sonic differences between the 5:25 and the 5:50 combo – which is nearly four inches bigger in every direction – one practical trade-off is that the 5:25's front panel does feel somewhat cramped. This is especially true on the right-hand side, where the array of mini toggle switches in close proximity to the Solo and Preset Depth knobs can prove rather fiddly to manipulate in the heat of battle. Around the back, stowing the 5:25's supplied footswitch successfully is a job better suited to neurosurgeons and watchmakers than impatient, worse-for-wear guitar players on dark stages.

That aside, both amplifiers are built to Mesa's expected high standards in the company's Petaluma, California facility, and give us no reason to question their road-worthiness.

Both models have a re-engineered clean mode that promises additional high-end sparkle and warmer low-end

The Rivals

The extremely versatile **Egnater Rebel 30** (£749) is a bargain, and a must-try. The **Fender Hot Rod Deluxe III** (£910) remains extremely popular for good reason: the **Two-Rock Jet 22 & 35** (from £2,369) are wonderful, albeit without the low-volume usability of the Mesas

Sounds

Powering up and engaging channel one's clean mode on full power, there's no mistaking the Californian accent of either amplifier, despite the stereotypically 'British' nature of the 5:25's EL84 output stage and the US heritage of the 5:50's 6L6s. There's plenty of 'blackface' Fender in the DNA of both models, with the 5:25 more compressed and Deluxe- or Princeton-like, while the larger cabinet and higher power rating of the 5:50 translates into a massive Twin-style clean voice with piano-like bass, but a softer, more rounded modern high-end personality than the class of '65.

With the 5:25's output aided by Mesa's propriety Dyna-Watt technology, it punches well above its weight in terms of volume. But in a wide-open A/B test with the 50-watter, you don't need to drag either model onto a daytime TV chat show to work out who the daddy is.



There's plenty of versatility, not least thanks to Mesa's channel-assignable power switching

Admittedly, the 5:50's stage-filling punch is massively overpowered for most normal real-world gig venues, but that's where the power-scaling comes in: great for players who like to live on the edge of break-up without breaking glass.

Flipping over to Crunch mode, both amps deliver a more midrange-y tonality that's just the ticket for sinewy roots and classic rock, older blues styles and even hard rock at the upper end of the gain spectrum, particularly with judicious use of the five-band EQ to taste. Given the tonal versatility across both voices of channel one, and the small-amp-to-big-amp power scaling options, this channel alone would be more than enough amp for many players, yet it's only half of the story.

Flipping over to channel two in Blues mode, you'll find a voice that's much more Gary Moore than Muddy Waters when it comes to the level of gain available. However, don't discount the highly musical tones that are available when you dial the dirt back. Channel two doesn't have to be your dirty channel – indeed, one of the most versatile combinations we found for stage use had channel two's Blues mode dialled in for edgy cleans, and channel one's Crunch mode set up for dirtier lead excursions.

When channel two is set to Burn, the difference between the 5:25 and the 5:50 is at its most marked across all three power settings. The 5:25's EL84 power stage, Celestion Vintage 30 driver and small cabinet lend the Burn channel's high-gain voice a slightly nasal character that struggles to punch with enough authority for a truly convincing metal rhythm sound, but it can definitely get into the right ballpark for a few heavier numbers in a pub covers set. If high-gain is your thing and you are a fully paid-up worshipper at the black altar, the 5:50's Celestion C90 driver, extra cabinet inches and duo of 6L6s combine to deliver the gut punch you need, with tightness and headroom to spare, at 25 and 50 watts.

Both amps share that modern Boogie characteristic of a slightly soft attack when compared to the fast response



of many vintage-style hand-wired circuits, with a smoothness that almost feels like some light studio compression has been applied somewhere in the signal chain. The reverb is smooth and soupy, too, and it's very forgiving, dynamically, but this is still an amp that may take a little getting used to.

Verdict

If you're in the market for the ultimate compact, do-it-all combo and money is no object, we wouldn't hesitate in recommending the Gold Award-winning Mesa/Boogie Mark V. However, it's well over two grand at current street prices, and thus too damn expensive for most of us. The tweaks to the Express Series bring these new Plus amplifiers significantly closer to the massive versatility of the Mark V, for a lot less cash. For the majority of players, the 5:25 delivers a whole lotta grin for the money. But the 5:50 gives you all that and more, and if high levels of amp gain are a major part of your sound, then the additional punch of the 5:50 makes it the logical choice. It's never not going to be enough amp, that's for sure. 📌

The Bottom Line

We like: Huge versatility in both sonic and practical terms; well-priced in today's market

We dislike: Not everyone requires this level of complexity

Guitarist says: Useful and worthwhile upgrades to two class-leading all-rounders

Mesa/Boogie Express Plus 5:25

PRICE: £1,499

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Valve combo

OUTPUT: 25 watts, switchable to 15 or 5

VALVES: 2x EL84 power valves, 5x 12AX7 preamp valves

DIMENSIONS: 482 (h) x 285 (w) x 204mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 20.5/45

LOUDSPEAKER: 1x12 Celestion Vintage 30

CHANNELS: 2, footswitchable. Channel 1 features Clean and Crunch modes, channel 2 Blues and Burn

CONTROLS: Both channels feature voicing switches, gain, treble, mid, bass, reverb, master, assignable preset contour and multi-watt power switch. Assignable 5-band graphic EQ and footswitchable global solo level control

FOOTSWITCH: Supplied 4-button unit for channel switching, reverb on/off, 5-band EQ on/off and solo boost on/off

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Buffered effects loop, valve-powered spring reverb, 1x 8-ohm and 2x 4-ohm 1/4-inch jack speaker outs

OPTIONS: 5:25 head (£1,299), rackmount 5:25 head (£1,299)

Westside Distribution

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www.mesa-boogie.com

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Mesa/Boogie Express Plus 5:50

PRICE: £1,599

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Valve combo

OUTPUT: 50 watts, switchable to 25 or 5

VALVES: 2x 6L6 power valves, 5x 12AX7 preamp valves

DIMENSIONS: 581 (h) x 298 (w) x 244mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 24.5/54

LOUDSPEAKER: 1x12 Celestion C90 Black Shadow

CHANNELS: 2, footswitchable. Channel 1 features Clean and Crunch modes, channel two Blues and Burn

CONTROLS: Both channels feature voicing switches, gain, treble, mid, bass, reverb, master, assignable preset contour and multi-watt power switch. Assignable 5-band graphic EQ and footswitchable global solo level control

FOOTSWITCH: Supplied 4-button unit for channel switching, reverb on/off, 5-band EQ on/off and solo boost on/off

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Buffered effects loop, valve-powered spring reverb, 1x 8-ohm and 2x 4-ohm 1/4-inch jack speaker outs

OPTIONS: 5:50 head (£1,429)



Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★