

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

MESA ENGINEERING HAS REPLACED THE HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL F-SERIES WITH A NEW LINE OF AMPS. **DAVID GREEVES** HOPS ON BOARD THE BOOGIE EXPRESS

Mesa Engineering famously grew out of Randall Smith's talent for hot-rodding Fender's little Princeton combo to produce a big sound from a small package. As is well-known, Carlos Santana's comment that Smith's little amps could "really boogie" is the source of the second half of the Mesa Boogie name. So small but powerful combos are central to the company's make-up, and over the years they've added a third trait to the equation: flexibility.

Introduced in 2002, Mesa's F-Series amps distilled the Boogie philosophy into a simpler, more affordable format, with predictable success. The new Express 5:50 and Express 5:25 amps, the anointed successors of the F-50 and F-30, are priced more or less the same but add quite a few new features. It's an exciting prospect to say the least. You can read what Randall Smith has to say about his new creations on page 84. Meanwhile, here's what we made of them.

PRE & POWER AMP

Although these two combos are based around completely different power sections – a pair of 6L6 valves for the 5:50 and a pair of EL84s hooked up to Mesa's Dyna-Watt circuitry (see box on page 80) for the 5:25 – the controls are exactly the same. You get two channels each with its own set of controls, arranged in two rows – simple, clear and accessible. In addition to gain and master volume knobs, you get treble, mid and bass EQ controls, a reverb level knob and a contour control.

This last feature applies a preset EQ curve. It's the classic Boogie 'smile' curve (imagine the Mark IV's five-band parametric EQ set in a V), which boosts bass and treble while scooping out the mid-range a little. The effect is not dissimilar to that of the 'loudness' button you find on some hi-fi – it's designed to add extra punch. While the F-Series featured a simple contour on/off switch, here



GBINFO

MESA BOOGIE EXPRESS 5:50

BUILT IN: USA
TYPE: 1x12 all-valve combo

POWER: 50 watts Class-AB, switchable to 5 watts Class-A

VALVES: 2 x 6L6, 5 x 12AX7

FEATURES: 2 independent channels with gain, treble, mid, bass, reverb, master volume and contour controls, 2 switchable voicings per channel, 50 watts/5 watts switch, effects loop, tube-driven long-tank spring reverb, 1 x 8-ohm output, 2 x 4-ohm outputs

SPEAKER: 1 x 12-inch Celestion C90

FOOTSWITCH: 3-button footswitch included (channel, reverb & contour on/off)

DIMENSIONS: 580(w) x 500(h) x 300(d) mm (max, with handle, and controls)

WEIGHT: 24.5kg (54lbs)

EXPRESS 5:25

BUILT IN: USA
TYPE: 1x10 all-valve combo

POWER: 25 watts Class-AB, switchable to 5 watts Class-A

VALVES: 2 x EL84, 5 x 12AX7

FEATURES: 2 independent channels with gain, treble, mid, bass, reverb, master volume and contour controls, 2 switchable voicings per channel, 25 watts/5 watts switch, effects loop, tube-driven long-tank spring reverb, 1 x 8-ohm output, 2 x 4-ohm outputs

SPEAKER: 1 x 10-inch Eminence E50

FOOTSWITCH: 3-button footswitch included (channel, reverb & contour on/off)

DIMENSIONS: 485(w) x 420(h) x 285(d) mm (max, with handle, and controls)

WEIGHT: 17.8kg (39.2lbs)

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DYNA-WHAT?

UNDERSTANDING THE 5:25'S SECRET WEAPON

■ Mesa's Dyna-Watt circuitry is a clever way of getting more power out the 5:25's two EL84 valves, which would traditionally yield only 15 to 20 watts.

The technology is not new – Mesa first filed a patent for Dyna-Watt in 1986 – but it has undergone a good deal of refinement. In layman's terms, Dyna-Watt effectively stores up

power so it can be released when you hit a note – Randall Smith uses the analogy of a camera flash – giving more power at that instant. The amp is constantly recharging and releasing power as you play, though it's not something you'll notice at all – we didn't witness any notes being artificially cut off or any other odd behaviour from the 5:25.



you can set how much you want for each channel and even footswitch it in and out.

Another key feature is that each channel is switchable between two different voicings: 'clean' and 'crunch' on channel 1, and 'blues' and 'burn' on channel 2. These voicings offer progressively increasing amounts of gain, distortion and sustain. This format follows that of other Mesa amps we've reviewed recently, such as the Stiletto Ace and the Lonestar Special, which offer multiple voicings per channel, and we're glad that this added versatility has made it into even the company's cheapest amps.



■ The included footswitch changes channels and switches the reverb and contour EQ on and off

The same goes for the ability to switch both amps to run at five watts in single-ended Class-A mode. This is done via a small switch at the rear and adds a whole new range of sounds and possibilities.

Both amps are equipped with a simple parallel effects loop – there's no mix/level control as there is on some amps. There's one 8-ohm speaker output (which will usually be hooked up to the internal speaker) and two 4-ohm speaker outs (used to connect the internal speaker and an 8-ohm extension cab at the same time).

CABINETS & SPEAKERS

In any other company, the Express 5:50 would be described as a compact 1x12 combo, but the truly tiny 5:25, equipped with a single 10-inch speaker, makes it look large in comparison. Don't let their size fool you though – while perfectly portable, both amps have that reassuring Mesa Boogie weight about them. These combos feel very well built, from the rock-solid cabinets to the large metal grille protecting the tubes, to the tough tolex covering and trademark leather corner protectors.

The 5:50 is equipped with a 12-inch 'Black Shadow' C90 speaker, manufactured for Mesa by Celestion, while the 5:25 gets a 10-inch Eminence E50, another proprietary Mesa driver. Both use ceramic magnets. Despite their small size, there's also room inside the cabinets for a full-length spring reverb tank and space to store the included mains lead and three-button footswitch (for channel, reverb and contour EQ switching, complete with carrying pouch and long 5-pin DIN lead) when on the move.

SOUNDS

Considering their differing sizes and valves, it's a surprise that these two combos don't sound more different. Given its larger cabinet and speaker, we'd expect the 5:50 to have the upper hand in terms of low end, but the plucky 5:25 keeps up admirably – there's an amazing amount of bass on offer – only occasionally betraying its size with a slightly boxy edge to the sound. It's the more 'shouty' of the two, firing notes out while the 5:50 has a more spacious, room-filling vibe. The 6L6s in the 5:50 also give it a slightly crisper, glassier flavour, as compared to the 5:25's more warm and rounded EL84 overtones.

As a small gigging amp, the 5:25 is an undoubted star, however. There's a lot of volume on offer thanks to that clever Dyna-Watt technology, and the sheer range of sounds – all of them excellent and very usable, we might add – that Mesa has managed to pack in is once again astonishing. Sensibly, on both amps, the four channel voicings have been designed to overlap – 'clean' with gain set high is in the same ballpark as 'crunch' with the gain set low, for example – so you can do whatever you want with them. If you're a more traditional player, you might opt for the 'clean' voicing on channel 1 with 'blues' on channel 2 for anything from a lightly overdriven tone to a full-on distorted lead. If you're a heavy rocker, 'crunch' on channel 1 will kick out a sizzling rhythm sound and 'burn' on channel 2 puts you into creamy, sustaining Rectifier territory. Best of all, the amps clean up wonderfully when you roll back the volume on the guitar.

The tone controls are powerful and intuitive to use, and the variable

DETAILS

COMPACT AND VERSATILE, THESE ARE TWO TOP QUALITY COMBOS



■ You can switch the variable EQ contour controls in and out using the footswitch



■ The two 4-ohm outputs let you use the internal speaker with an 8-ohm extension cab



■ 'Clean', 'crunch', 'blues' and 'burn' voicings offer increasing levels of gain and distortion



GBOPINION

MESA BOOGIE EXPRESS 5:50

GOLD STARS

- ★ Brilliant range of brilliant tones
- ★ Excellent build quality
- ★ Very easy to get what you want from the controls

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Just about anyone really!

GBOPINION

MESA BOOGIE EXPRESS 5:25

GOLD STARS

- ★ Brilliant range of brilliant tones
- ★ Excellent build quality
- ★ Very easy to get what you want from the controls

BLACK MARKS

- It feels like the small cab and speaker are holding it back
- A bit more background noise than we'd like

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone looking for a compact amp for the home, studio and small gigs

contour controls are an excellent addition. You can footswitch them in to give solos an extra lift, but you may find yourself leaving them on all the time. The great thing about this one-knob tone control is how easy it makes dialling in just the right amount of extra bass and treble.

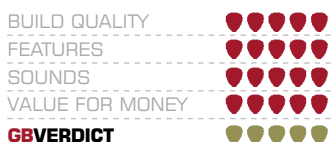
Weighing the two amps against each other, the 5:50 has the edge over the 5:25 in that, with more overall volume on offer, there's more clean headroom available on channel one. We feel the bigger cabinet and speaker also add an extra fullness and depth to the sound. However, Mesa does produce a range of matching extension speakers for the Express Series, and both amps are also available in head format. Plugged into a 4x12 cab, the 5:25 sounds positively

immense, so this might be an avenue worth investigating, especially if you're not too fussed about clean sounds and want an amp you can really crank up at a small gig.

The 5-watt mode adds an extra dimension to the Express amps. Running in single-ended Class-A mode, the sound smoulders into smooth distortion very readily. Notes become less well defined, and you can kiss clean headroom goodbye, but you can really get these amps cooking at a civilised volume. The 5-watt mode would be excellent for home recording applications, though both amps exhibit rather more background hiss than we'd ideally like to hear, with the 5:25 being the worse offender. You won't notice it when you're actually playing though.

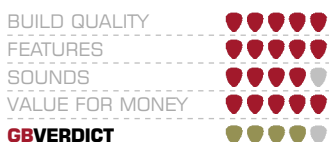
GBRATINGS

MESA BOOGIE EXPRESS 5:50



GBRATINGS

MESA BOOGIE EXPRESS 5:25



GBCONCLUSION

SMALL BUT MIGHTY – AND HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

■ With the Express amps, the folks at Mesa have looked at their F-Series, pinched some of the most desirable features from their more expensive amps – like switchable channel voicings and a low-power single-ended mode – and come up with two highly desirable amplifiers.

For the extra overall volume, and the extra clean headroom that goes with it, we'd probably tend towards the 5:50, but we can easily imagine falling for the petite powerhouse that is the 5:25, especially twinned with an extension cab. It might not be the *only* amp you'll ever need (hey – we're guitarists after all), but either one of these combos will successfully bridge the gaps between practising at home, playing on stage and recording in the studio, whether you play country, blues, rock or metal. For ease of use, versatility and tonal range, and pound-for-pound value for money, the Express 5:50 and 5:25 are hard to fault. **GB**