



PHOTOGRAPHY NEIL GODWIN

# Mesa Engineering Express 5:25 1 x 10 & 5:50 1 x 12 combos

The new Express Series has arrived – could these amps turn out to be the best selling Boogies ever? Hold on to your wallet... by Nick Guppy

Over the years, Mesa's entry point has been perhaps a little more contentious than its higher-priced models, with some amps hitting the bulls-eye while others suffered unduly from noise or lacked the right mix of features to catch people's imagination. But that all changed with the F Series, a serious, stripped-down, two-channel monster tone machine that delivered some of the best clean and distorted sounds ever to come out of Petaluma, USA, and received a rare Guitarist Gold award. Since then, designer Randall Smith has been mining a rich vein of inspiration that's resulted in some of his best ever amps. However, all good things come to an end and, after a long and distinguished run, Mesa's award-winning F Series is bowing out in favour of something very special.

Introduced at the recent winter NAMM show, the new Express range takes over as the entry level to Mesa's ever-expanding catalogue and we are delighted to be taking the first look at it here, in the shape of the 5:25 and 5:50 combos.

**The Express 5:25 is a perfect pick-up-and-go amp, ideal for casual gigs of any sort, from jazz and country through to all-out metal**

If Guitarist dished out awards for the best-dressed amplifiers then Mesa would be winning them more than any other amp builder, and the Express amps are no exception. On the face of it, here are just another couple of black vinyl-covered boxes, but when you start looking at these amps close up you begin to realise just how much time and attention has been paid to getting the Express exactly right. Details like the leather corners, recessed badge and the stiff-as-a-board grille cloth all shout quality, as does the tough ply cabinet and steel chassis with its trademark ventilating slots. But it's the way in which all these details hang together that really sets Mesa apart when it comes to amp styling. Someone has taken on the challenge of creating a

new black box that looks different from everybody else's black box and attacked it with real enthusiasm and passion – the results, as always, speak volumes. Even the logo stands out as a mini-masterpiece of graphic design.

Inside the chassis, Randall Smith's unique hand-drawn printed circuit board is as pretty as ever to those who like looking at such things, with surgically clean soldering and wiring and the usual custom components that shout 'Mesa' every bit as loudly as the badge on the front of the grille.

As you can see, one combo is bigger than the other. The bigger 5:50 is a well-proportioned 1 x 12 powered by a pair of 6L6 output valves with a custom Celestion 12-inch loudspeaker, while the diminutive 5:25 is a 1 x 10 combo powered by a pair of EL84s and a 10-inch speaker.

The controls are identical for both amps and relatively straightforward but, as with most Mesa designs, there are a few hidden secrets that are worth spending time on. Ostensibly a two-channel design like the F Series, the



**MESA EXPRESS 5:25 TEST RESULTS**

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

■ **WE LIKED** Terrific flexibility; plenty of features; incredible tone for a small combo

■ **WE DISLIKED** It's expensive, but otherwise impossible to fault

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Express again has two channels with rotary controls that cover the usual functions of gain, master volume, EQ and reverb. However, each channel is expanded with a small toggle switch that lets you pre-select one of two voicing options: clean or crunch are your choices on channel one; blues or burn on channel two. It's four voices at your fingertips that cover pretty much every gain guitarist's needs.

Over towards the right of the front panel a third mini-toggle takes care of channel selection when the footswitch isn't in use, and after this we come to the contour controls. The Express's contour function is basically the notorious Boogie five-band graphic EQ set to the classic 'V' shape, albeit on a single knob. It expands the amp's bass and treble response while scooping out some mid-range, giving the amp a feeling of a broader tone – much the same as the 'loudness' button you find on some hi-fi kit. On the F series, this was just a switch and only available on one channel – on the Express it's available on both channels and Randall's cleverly added two mix controls, so you can blend in as much or as little of the effect as desired: neat. The contour controls are also footswitchable and pre-selectable from separate switches on the front panel, with the relevant LED marker on the footswitch lighting up in different colours to let you know which channel has the contour function engaged.

Moving around to the back, both combos get a complete set of remote switching jacks – you can interface them with MIDI controllers that support relay-powered external switching – and a comprehensive choice of loudspeaker outputs.

And now, deliberately left until last, is the bit that will really make you sit up and take notice. Although the power stages are quite different, both amps have a small toggle switch on the back panel that takes you from normal Class AB push-pull operation, into the

★★★★★  
**Guitarist CHOICE**★★★★★  
**Guitarist GOLD****MESA ENGINEERING EXPRESS 5:25 1 x 10****ORIGIN:** USA**TYPE:** All valve two channel Class AB/Class A combo with solid-state rectification**OUTPUT:** 25W RMS Class AB, 5W RMS Class A single-ended**VALVES:** Five ECC83/12AX7 preamp, two EL84 power amp**DIMENSIONS:** 410 (h) x 480 (w) x 275mm (d)**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 16/34**CABINET:** Birch ply**LOUDSPEAKER:** Single 10-inch Celestion Black Shadow**CHANNELS:** Two, each with two voicing options**CONTROLS:** Gain, bass, mid, treble, volume, reverb and contour x 2**FOOTSWITCH:** Three-button footswitch changes channels, toggles contour and reverb functions**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Clean/crunch switch on channel one, blues/burn switch on channel two. Contour function, channel assign switches, series FX loop, Class A/AB switch, remote switching jacks**OPTIONS:** None**MESA ENGINEERING EXPRESS 5:50 1 x 12 COMBO**

As 5:25 1 x 10 except...

**OUTPUT:** 50W RMS Class AB, 5W RMS Class A single-ended**VALVES:** Five ECC83/12AX7 preamp, two 6L6 power amp**DIMENSIONS:** 495 (h) x 570 (w) x 290mm (d)**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 26/57**LOUDSPEAKER:** Single 12-inch Celestion Black Shadow

altogether different realm of pure single-ended Class A, using just one valve. On the larger Express 5:50, this means you can flip from a very powerful and full-sounding 50 watts down to just five watts; on the 5:25 you can choose between a claimed 25 watts in Class AB or five watts, again in Class A, from just one EL84. These two modes are so different in terms of tone and response you can almost think of them as being two different amps, accessible with one flip of a switch. Now if that isn't clever we don't know what is.

**SOUNDS:** It's all looking good so far, but ultimately Mesas are about tone, and we want to hear it!

With identical preamps but different power stages, cabinet sizes and loudspeakers, it's interesting to hear

what differences there are between the two amps. The larger 5:50, with its pair of 6L6s feeding a 12-inch Celestion driver, has a superlative clean sound on channel one, with a rich full bass that's quite tightly defined and a shimmering treble that's characteristic of many modern Boogie amps. Both the mid and bass controls need to be set in the lower half of their travel to achieve a decent balance, while the powerful treble control can be used around the half to three-quarter mark. Flipping this channel into crunch mode unleashes a powerful and highly expressive distortion that's dynamic and quick to respond. The contour control is key to getting the most out of both of these sounds – balance it carefully at around the halfway mark and you can add a subtle chime to the clean voicing or a



The variable contour functions and dual power levels make for enormous versatility



The 5:25 has gain capabilities that can cover many styles with ease



The three-button footswitch toggles channels, contour and reverb functions

➤ more aggressive and up-front edge to the crunch option. You don't need to set the gain control high for this, anywhere around four or five with humbucking pickups or slightly more for single-coils will get you some terrific tone.

Channel two is dedicated more for lead sounds, although with the gain set low it's just as good for rhythm work. The overall tone here is warmer and more rounded than that of channel one. You can use the contour control to good effect here – setting it high to dial out some of the mid-range if you want cleaner sounds, or low for more mid-range punch. The blues voicing is simply one of the best lead sounds we've heard from any Boogie amplifier: it's rich, vocal and just a delight to play. The Express's burn voicing takes you into the high-gain realm that Boogies are renowned for: fluid, harmonic-laden searing sustain that hangs on to each note for what seems like an eternity. Like all the best Boogie amps, this channel plays that rare trick of making you seem like a much better player than you actually are – even mistakes can sound good if you hit them hard enough!

Switching the 5:50 down to single-ended Class A reveals an entirely different character, with a rich, velvety bottom end and the reverb adding a warm halo around higher notes that makes them seem to float in mid-air with an almost three-dimensional clarity. The change in tone is the main

## The larger 5:50, with its pair of 6L6s feeding a 12-inch Celestion driver, has a superlative clean sound on channel one

benefit of this lower wattage option, but it's also useful for obtaining power amp drive at usable volumes. At home, or in the studio, for example, this five-watt single-ended option turns the Express into an inspirational tool that will have you experimenting for hours, finding all kinds of tonal nuances.

By comparison, the smaller 5:25 combo has a generally crisper and less mid-influenced feel to it, though any reservations about this tiny amp's capability of handling a live gig should be binned immediately. It's phenomenally loud for its size and the contour control can be used to enhance the bass response almost to the point where you'd swear it was a 1 x 12 rather than a 1 x 10 enclosure. Just as rewarding to play – perhaps even more so, if you include the disbelief that others will experience on hearing so much tone from such a small box – the Express 5:25 is a perfect pick-up-and-go amp, ideal for casual gigs of any sort, from jazz and country through to all-out metal. The overall tonal range is a little more limited than the larger 5:50, but in the studio this translates into an amp that instantly


finds its place in the mix with authority, making it a true delight to record.

### Verdict

To say Mesa's new Express combos are very good is rather like saying a Ferrari Enzo is a bit of a quick car. We're seriously impressed at just how well the whole design works from a playing perspective, and how well both amps perform with regard to noise levels. The price is a stickier subject.

Nothing Mesa makes can be called cheap, yet we think although both combos sell for over a grand they're still excellent value for money. They're hardly entry level, though, compared to some of their nearest competitors.

The 5:25 undoubtedly has instant 'I want' appeal because of its size. However, because the larger 5:50 is only a little more cash, it's unlikely to achieve the popularity it deserves: most players will probably go for the larger amp because they'll think that on the face of it, they're getting a lot more for their money. However, a 5:25 in head format with a couple of 1 x 10 extension cabs might change all that and could be the ultimate mini-stack.

Whichever version of the range tempts you the most, we can guarantee you won't be disappointed. 

**Mesa Engineering Express 5:25 1 x 10**

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

**Mesa Engineering Express 5:50 1 x 12**

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

# Express design

We pull Mesa's designer and president, Randall Smith, away from his soldering iron to tell us about the genesis of the new Express amps by Nick Guppy



**W**hat starts the ball rolling when you commence a new design?

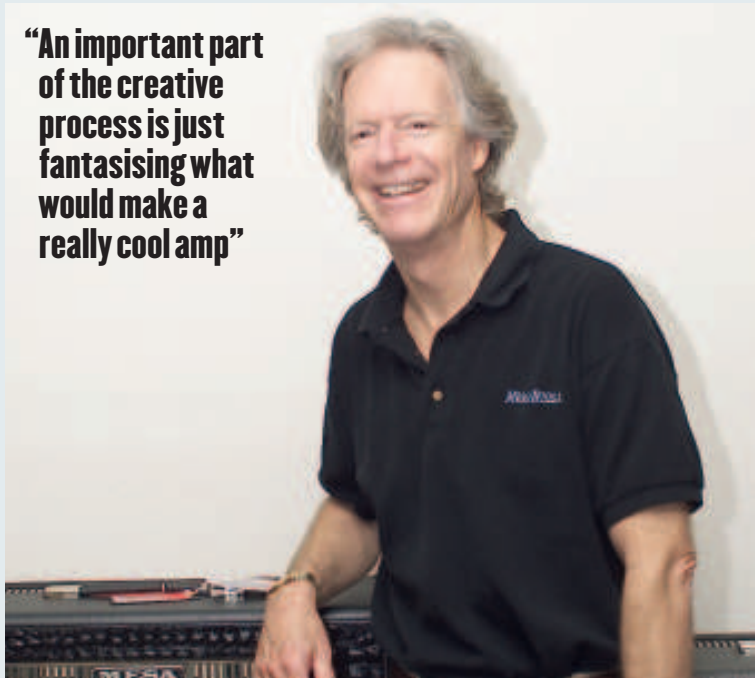
"Part of the process is picking the things we know work well and seeing where they can benefit another product, especially the weaker points of existing products. For example, our amp circuitry has traditionally required quite a number of separate power supplies to make everything work. But by modifying the power transformer(s) and reconfiguring many of the sub-circuits, I was able to replace four separate low-voltage power supplies with a single one. This opened up space on the board so I could add another preamp tube – and in the Express amps, that tube is dedicated to the reverb circuitry. Another example would be the power amp switchable between high-power push-pull and low-power single-ended configurations whose patent has just been approved.

"An important part of the creative process is just fantasising what would make a really cool amp – which sonic voicings do we want to include and where do we get them? For the Express amps, the blues and crunch modes are both brand new, whereas the clean and burn voicings are evolved from earlier designs."

**We've often heard the phrase 'black magic' mentioned when you talk about the way you lay out a printed circuit board. How much of an effect can the PCB layout have on the amp?**

"It took me almost a year to produce the Express line, and most of the time was spent designing the board. But it's worth the effort because a well-done circuit board

**"An important part of the creative process is just fantasising what would make a really cool amp"**



provides both density and consistency that you can't get any other way. You couldn't build an amp like the Road King using point-to-point, and something like the Express would cost three times as much and suffer from scattered, inconsistent results in terms of delivering that magic. It's more difficult, and I think more important, to deliver consistency than to occasionally produce magic: what good is magic if you can't produce it consistently? I've got to sleuth out where that magic is coming from. It may no longer be 'magic' once I've understood it. But the important thing is that the 'magical performance' can then be built into each and every amp."

the first time. By the next day he had made some sample cabinets and we hardly changed anything after that. What gave us the most trouble was the name... and then the logo. We've used so many good names in the past it's getting hard to come up with new ones and this time we were changing the name right up to the first run of the chassis! It was going to be the Subway Express and the Magnum Express. Also, we wanted to bring some attention to that patented feature that allows these amps to switch down to five watts single-ended."

**How easy is it for you to keep coming up with new ideas after all this time and where does the inspiration come from?**

"It's almost easier now because we've got so much more to work with: more ideas, more experience, and a lot more great circuits. It's still exciting for me to be designing new amplifiers with things I've just discovered, and then seeing even more possibilities emerge as each new design unfolds. But 95 per cent of my time is spent locked in on doing the actual design and layout work, solving the problems and sweating the details. In between the excitement and the fulfilment, it can be daunting and tedious. But if you're going to make something good, you've got to do more than work at it, you've got to live it. And if you're going to live it, then you'd better love it.

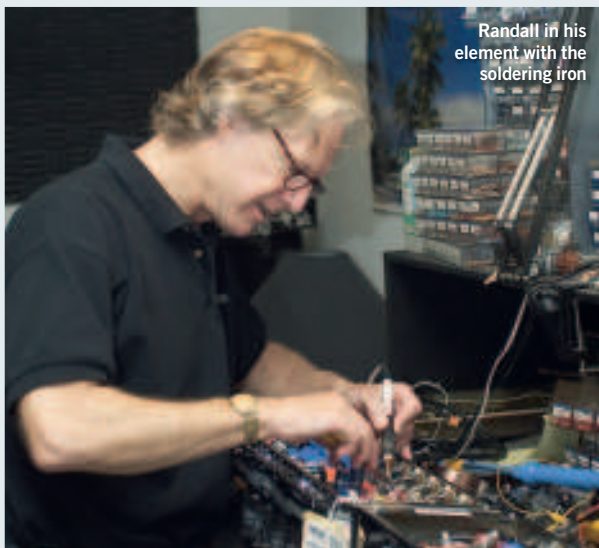
"Thanks for your interest in Mesa/Boogie all these years. Now go out and play!"

**The Express has its own palette of sounds, yet we can hear hints of other famous Mesa amps in there too. What tonal ingredients went into the Express?**

"Parts of the Express circuitry trace their lineage back to the Studio .22 of the early eighties. Parts of it came from the Lone Star – whose own history goes back to the Mark I. There are bits borrowed from the Stiletto, more bits from the F Series and some of it is entirely new. And of course, without the great founders of Fender – the original tweed and blackface amps – none of this would have evolved."

**How much time and effort goes into the styling of an amp like the Express?**

"We discussed how the cab should look and Jim Aschow knocked it out of the park



Randall in his element with the soldering iron