



Mesa/Boogie Lone Star Special

By Douglas Baldwin

Class A amplification has achieved a certain Holy Grail quality among tube-amp enthusiasts—and rightfully so. Whereas most tube amps use the more efficient Class A/B power, splitting the signal between pairs of tubes, pure Class A power generates 100 percent of the signal with one tube, creating a warm, smooth sound that is low in output. Most large Class A amps actually shift to Class A/B at some point in their output; this results in a sound that is cool in its own right but that lacks the single-tube magic. Leave it to Randall Smith at Mesa/Boogie, then, to get both tones into one circuit, with the Lone Star Special—a fresh breath of Class A air capable of leaping out of the corners into which other Class A amps paint themselves.

LOOKS Nearly identical to the original Lone Star, the Special features some distinctly vintage touches: the rounded front panel; black, ribbed barrel knobs; thick leather handle; and chocolaty “Cocoa Bronco” vinyl, accented with brown piping and a tan grille. But this is far more than a pretty simulation of some ancient tube amp. And, of course, Mesa/Boogie always packs their eye candy with inno-

A simple yet flexible front panel provides a wide range of tonal and power options.

native practicality and rugged construction—to wit, thick leather corner protectors, a footswitch pouch around back, and (removable) casters that make rolling and stacking the Special a breeze. Not exactly light at 59 pounds, its smallish profile nevertheless makes it fairly easy to move around.

LAYOUT The Lone Star Special borrows the preamp format of the original Lone Star; it has two channels, with wide-ranging gain, treble, mid, bass, presence, and master-volume controls. Each channel's power output is controlled by a 5/15/30-watt switch—the Lone Star Special's secret weapon (more on this in a moment). The slightly hotter second channel has a selectable drive control, for adding gain, as well as a separate voicing switch. Set this switch to “normal” to bypass it; set it to “thick” or “thicker” to add greater gain and midrange coloration. An “output” control regulates global volume, while Mesa's patented footswitchable solo-level control will goose the volume during those annoying third sets when the bass player turns his midrange up to “mud.”

A series-wired FX loop, located around back, can be adjusted for varying lev-

els of send. Here, you'll also find a hard-bypass switch, which, when selected, removes the FX loop, along with the output and solo controls, from the signal path. An adjustable “slave” output captures the Special's magic—power tubes included—for direct recording or additional amplification. The superb reverb can be set for a spring resonance (bright) or for a plate response (warm), and can be set at separate levels for each channel.

SOUND The original Lone Star's vibe translates well to the Special's Class A format, in which there are one, two, or four individually selectable EL-84 tubes per channel. As Mesa/Boogie's Doug West (who also goes by “Tone Boy”) relates, “Over the years, we tried several different Class A designs, but felt that a five-watt, single-tubed amp would have a limited appeal, so switching [to higher power settings] was key.” So key, in fact, that engineer and company president Randall Smith has a patent pending on the circuit. Adds West, “Once we teamed the multiple power settings with the Lone Star's preamp circuitry, we knew we had a winner.”

In five-watt, or single-tubed, mode, the Special nailed classic Class A response, feeling at once greasy, spongy, and sparkly. And when I raised the gain and dug in with my pick, I was rewarded with an electrode-drenched edge of distortion. At two tubes (15 watts) I found a low-rent blues tone; at four tubes (30 watts), the jangly sounds of British Invasion pop. Even that creamy



FEATURES

5, 15, or 30 watts of Class A power, individually selectable for each channel

Two channels, each with gain and master controls

Second channel features additional drive circuit

Footswitch for solo boost and channel selection

Available as a head only, or in 1x12, 2x12, or 4x10 combos, and in a wide range of custom finishes

PRICE

\$1,599 (1x12)

CONTACT

Mesa/Boogie Ltd.
707-778-6565
mesaboogie.com

ON THE CD

Track 50





Boogie lead tone could be dialed in—with channel 2's drive set to "thicker."

In short, this is easily the most versatile Class A amp I've ever played through. As is typical of such amps, the Special generates no nü-metal thrash or tight-bottomed Twin cleanliness but, rather, midrange

complexity, high-frequency sizzle, and a bottom end that is attuned to both single-coil pickups and humbuckers—especially when playing single notes with moderate gain. And the powerful 12" Mesa-branded Black Shadow speaker produced an accurate and uncolored sound at any volume.

ISITFORYOU? A word about power: just as Class A/B tube amps blow away solid-state amps of identical wattage, a 30-watt Class A amp will stand up quite favorably to a 50- or 100-watt class A/B amp. Add to this fact Mesa's very conservative power ratings, and you'll find the Lone Star Special to be the

very definition of a giant killer. Whether you'll be using it for atmospheric surgical strikes in the studio or at hot-and-bothered live club gigs, the Special will indeed deliver. For this, and for breaking out of the vintage ghetto in which so many Class A amps are confined, the Special earns our "1 Award."