

the 10 banks of presets, including various keyboards, guitar and bass, strings, brass, winds, voices, ethnic instruments, and even drums. Within each bank you can dial through dozens of patches using the larger selector knob on the right or a little button on your pickup controller (you can also use the foot pedals).

For effects, you get another row of knobs controlling Reverb/Delay, Chorus, Attack, Release, and Output. The two large footswitches in the front can control an array of tasks, but in general, they trigger Glide (which changes pitch like a whammy bar) and Hold (for holding a

note or chord and soloing over the top). Finally, there's a large Expression pedal, which can either control volume or various sweeps and modulations, depending on how you configure the unit. I also appreciate the fact that the manual for the GR-20 is fewer than 40 pages. There isn't anything too complicated about setting up this box or understanding the functions of its various features. Again, it's truly guitarist-friendly.

How does it sound? I own a top-end keyboard synthesizer, and I won't yank your chain and say the sounds are totally comparable, but the GR-20 does contain

plenty of excellent and very usable sounds. Among other things, you get the full array of good piano, organ, trumpet, sax and string presets (playing slow, orchestral string parts on a guitar is *fun*, trust me...). You can also find credible sitars, pan flutes, vibes, and drum sounds. There are some thin, silly sounds, too, but frankly, all synthesizers – guitar *and* keyboard – have their share of goofy presets. For example, the "guitar" settings aren't spectacular, but the electric bass sounds are solid. If you record at home, these will come in very handy.

To me, however, the key to guitar-syn-

thesizer happiness comes when you *blend* the synth tones with your regular guitar tones. A little trumpet or sitar with your smokin' lead tone can be wonderful. The best thing to do is experiment and search through the presets for sounds you like. Then, if you want, save them to a User patch for later use. Although it's a basic guitar synth, the GR-20 leaves ample room for guitarists to explore its many sounds and find their own synth voice. And that, ultimately, is what guitar playing is all about – finding your own voice. The Roland GR-20 just might help you do that.
– *Pete Prown*

Practical, But No Joke

Mesa Boogie's Lone Star Special the latest offering from Randall Smith

MESA BOOGIE WAS ESSENTIALLY THE FIRST BOUTIQUE AMP BUILDER. The California-based company was founded and operated by Randall Smith, who grew up in a musical family and early on learned an appreciation for great musical tones. He also learned about tube amp design, and while in high school repaired a bandmate's Sunn. Soon after, he opened a shop (Prune Music) and quickly discovered a demand for his repair work. Before long, his list of clients included a who's who list of Bay Area acts like Santana, Big Brother, the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Steve Miller, and others.

One day in 1969, Smith was in a particularly playful mood. As a prank, he modified a Fender Princeton belonging to Barry Melton, guitarist for Quicksilver Messenger Service, converting it to 4x10" Bassman specs. It just so happened that Carlos Santana heard Melton playing, and loved his tone. Smith was soon modding nearly every Fender Princeton in the area before the idea struck – why not build an amp from scratch that will sound like a

modded Princeton, but with some unique touches. Thus, the Mesa Boogie amp was born (and is this year nominated to enter VG's Hall of Fame).

Through the years, Smith has tweaked and twiddled with various subtle changes in the design of the Boogie (which, by the way, was reportedly named by Santana), and has never failed to stay on top of the game. We recently took for a test run Mesa Boogie's newest amp, the Lone Star Special.

A class A-design 2x12" combo that uses a 12AX7/5Y3 tube preamp section coupled with EL84 output tubes in its power section, the Lone Star Special features two independent channels with Gain, Treble, Middle, Bass, Presence and Master volume controls, and separate reverb controls for each channel with a Bright/Warm switch. The long-spring reverb is tube-driven. The second channel also uses a

switch to activate a multi-stage cascading drive control with a three position (Thick/Normal/Thicker) switch. Both channels boast a three-position output-power switch that allows a player to adjust output from 30 to 15 to 5 watts, as well as a Solo control that engages a pre-set volume. The back panel has access to an all-tube effects loop with a true-bypass switch, a slave out with level control, a fan switch, and external speaker jacks.

The Lone Star Special uses two Celestion G1280 speakers. The cabinet is available in five finishes with a host of custom options. The cab is well-built and flawlessly covered, with unique leather corner protectors and heavy-duty leather handle. It all makes for a great retro look. The LS Special is available as a 1x12" or 2x12" combo, as well as separate long and medium heads, a short head, or a compact 1x12" combo.

To see what the LS Special had to offer, we used our favorite 1972 Fender Stratocaster, a '59 Fender Esquire, and a '79 Ibanez Artist with humbuckers.

Starting with the Ibanez and the amp's first

channel on the 30-watt output setting (set to clean with the master volume and output level controls turned up, and gain down), we immediately began to grin as we were greeted with a full, fat punch that was extremely responsive with a sweet high-end typical of EL84 class A circuits. Low-end was plentiful and tight, and could be pushed hard to the point of overbearing. Every pickup position sounded very nice, and as we pushed the gain, we got a nice breakup for blues and light rock. Pushing the gain all the way and backing down the master volumes also produced nice gain, albeit in smaller quantities. We switched to the lower wattage settings and naturally lost a bit of punch and clarity, but the amp never stopped producing great tone, even at reduced volume. And the Solo preset works better if the output level is set lower than the solo volume; this is a great feature.

Next, we plugged in the Strat and, with a little tweaking, got a huge Strat tone with lots of sparkle and big, tight bottom. It was some of the fullest Strat tone we've



MESA BOOGIE LONESTAR SPECIAL

Features	Hand-built all-tube class A design, switchable output, independent channels with Gain, Treble, Mid, Bass, Presence, and Master volume controls, Solo volume preset control, cascading high-gain drive, all-tube long-spring reverb w/separate controls, two Celestion Black Shadow speakers, tube effects loop.
Price	
Contact	Mesa/Boogie, 1317 Ross Street, Petaluma, CA 94954; phone (707) 778-6565; mesaboogie.com.

heard, with nice breakup when the gain was pushed. We plugged in the Esquire and again got that sweet class A full, fat Tele tone – great for modern country pickin’.

Switching to Channel 2 (which is identical to Channel 1 except for the drive option), we set the Drive control to 4 o’clock and the Gain on 3 o’clock. We got plenty

of gain, fat, smooth, and punchy, and with ample low-end. Sustain and harmonics? Gobs.

We played with the Thick switch, which adds a subtle upper-midrange fatness. Using lower wattage settings, we pulled back the Drive and Gain and got a perfect balance of drive and clarity. With the

Strat, we dialed in a Strat tone that was so full and aggressive you’d swear you were playing a humbucker. With the Esquire, we could dial up a tone as fat as a Les Paul Junior. The Lone Star Special’s reverb can be as huge or subtle as you want, and it blends nicely.

The Lone Star Special is an exception-

ally sweet-sounding amp that covers all frequency ranges. Its overall tone is incredibly fat and full, with gain to spare, and exceptional clean tones. In fact, “exceptional” pretty much defines this amp in an all-around sense. But then, have Smith’s amp designs ever been anything less? – **Bob Tekippe**

For the Metalhead in All of Us

The B.C. Rich Eagle Supreme, Bich 10 Supreme

FROM THE MOCKINGBIRD to the Bich and the Eagle, since the 1970s, B.C. Rich guitars have been seducing players (and fans!) with their over-the-top looks and sexy body shapes.

Loaded with an unmistakable hard rock vibe, B.C. Rich axes have long induced a Pavlovian response in budding metalheads who salivate at the sight of one, then often give up a few of their one-time/former favorite guitars to get one. From pros like Kerry King (Slayer) and Joe Perry (Aerosmith) to your local garage band, B.C. Rich has always made an axe that could be appreciated by everybody.

One of the company’s newest twists/phases included opening its USA Custom Shop, the product of which are the company’s all-hand-crafted guitars. At the BCRU-SACC, there are no fancy CNC machines, and there is no mass production. In 2004, they produced 242 pieces employing “just” good ol’ American craftsmanship. Bodies are cut, shaped, and painted in California, then sent to Cincinnati for final assembly, with a total of six to eight months building time for each guitar.

We recently got a firm grip on a couple of B.C. Rich Custom Shop units; an Eagle Supreme and a Bich 10 Supreme. Both are constructed with 1/2" flame-maple top over laminated five-piece bodies (alternating between mahogany and walnut), with a

mahogany neck that, in true B.C. Rich tradition, runs through the body.

Our Eagle tester was a natural-finish beauty, while the Bich 10 sported BCR’s Translucent Red. And both boasted a flawless high-gloss finish that really accented their maple tops. The mahogany necks were capped with bound ebony fretboards with neatly executed abalone cloud inlays and bound rosewood overlays on the headstocks. The necks also featured 24 jumbo frets with superb levelling work, nicely rounded ends, and a polished finish, as well as a nicely cut and finished bone nut. The neck-through construction and absence of a neck heel allowed for excellent access up to the 24th fret. The comfortable C-shape necks gave both a fast feel, while the flatter 12"-radius fretboard allowed for low, buzz-free action.

The guitars’ heavily rounded and contoured bodies make both very comfortable to play and lighter than you might expect (about 8.5 pounds). Both have chrome hardware, including B.C. Rich Quad Bridges with intonation adjustments, and ultra-

smooth Grover Imperial tuners. The Bich 10’s four octave/high strings (E, B, G, D) were threaded through string ferrules in the headstock to four more tuners mounted in a body cut just past the bridge, which makes tuning easier than on a traditional 12-string, and it doesn’t clutter the headstock or make it look unbalanced. Electronics on the

Bich 10 include a Seymour Duncan JB (bridge position) and Jazz (neck position) pickups, and a Dimarzio Super Distortion/bridge. The Eagle uses a Duncan PAF in the neck position, with

coil splitters, phase switches, a varitone-like rotary switch (which uses capacitors) and an active Wolf Rose Bullet Preamp Circuit. Even with the 10-plus knobs and switches on each guitar, the layout looks good and well-conceived, following the body lines, not at all clunky or out of place.

Navigating the sea of switches and knobs on both guitars is at first a bit intimidating, and certainly isn’t everybody’s cup of tea. But these are custom guitars and can be set up with or without active electronics, coil splitters, phase switches, or the varitone.

I checked both guitars through a Carvin Belair 212 (VG

Aug ’05) combo (for clean tones), and a 50-watt Randall MTS running through 4x12" cab (for distorted tones). Through the clean channel of the Carvin, both proffered a huge variety of sounds, from clear and shimmering to fat and jazzy. The Bich 10’s hybrid 12-string sound was

the most fun to manipulate with the onboard electronics, producing a whole lot of usable and interesting clean sounds, from a thin, glassy acoustic 12-string sound to a big, full rhythm tone. The varitone and phase switches colored the sound a little too much for my taste, but the coil splitters and boost preamp were very useful.

Through the Modern module in the Randall, and with the guitars’ active preamp and varitone switches bypassed, both guitars had a tight, focused sound. The pickups were well-balanced, with strong upper midrange. The absence of the octave strings on the low E and A means you can chug on power chords without cluttering up the tone, then switch to the Clean module for shimmering 12-string passages.

The active preamp on both guitars means all the drive and sustain you could want are right at your fingertips. The circuit is useful for soloing and doesn’t add much noise. It does lessen note definition, though, if you punch it in too much.

In the fair amount of time I spent playing the Bich 10 and Eagle, I came to appreciate their tones with the electronic preamps for the most part bypassed. Run “dry,” both offer nice, full humbucker sounds. But guitar players like their

switches and knobs, and the ability to customize your tone can be very appealing, as well.

Both B.C. Rich guitars played as “seductively” as they looked; a true testament to American guitar craftsmanship and design where art meets technology. – **Phil Feser**

B.C. RICH EAGLE/BICH 10 SUPREME

Features	Handcrafted, flame-maple tops, neck-through construction, contoured bodies, active preamp circuitry with varitone, coil splitter, and phase switches, Grover Imperial tuners, pickups by Duncan and DiMarzio.
Price	Eagle Supreme: \$3,900 (retail); Bich 10 Supreme: \$4,099 (retail).
Contact	B.C. Rich Guitars, 4940 Delhi Pike, Cincinnati, CA 45238; (800) 999-5558; bcrich.com.com.