

THE SPIRIT OF ART IN TECHNOLOGY™



CRITICAL ACCLAIM

BIRTH OF A "CUTTING EDGE CLASSIC"



"A manufacturer's sincerity of purpose is reflected in its commitment to quality and attention to detail, and Mesa/Boogie has been an industry leader in this regard for decades."

Guitar Player—June 2005

"The fat clean really is as big as a whale. A killer whale. There's nothing sluggish about it: in fact the bottom end is as bouncy and economic as the one on Cameron Diaz, and just as fun to spank."

Guitarist—Feb./Mar. 2005

"we'd urge you to try a Mesa Stiletto right away. It takes the classic British sound as its base, then builds on it with extra balls, gain and astounding flexibility for literally any style of rock."

Guitar Buyer—May 2005

"The sheer resolution of this amp is just goddamn incredible. There isn't the slightest hint of muddiness to be found anywhere, and especially on the 'tite' settings"

Guitarist Australia—Feb./Mar. 2005

"The extremely versatile six-mode Stilettos cast a lush harmonic haze over the classic EL34 tones while punching into a deviant new world of defiant British manners."

Guitar World—2005

"once you've tried a Recto Cab—you'll wonder how you did without one, such is the thunderous slam and almost brutal efficiency with which they deliver your sound."

Guitar Buyer—May 2005

"The Stilettos represent another high-water mark as Mesa/Boogie continues to pursue the leading edge of modern amp design."

Guitar Player—June 2005

"Amidst the current abundance of high-priced one-tone wonders, the Stilettos are an absolutely astounding value"

Guitar Player—June 2005

"It takes an incredible amount of time to create an amp with this much tonal range and flexibility, and then hone each circuit reconfiguration to perfection, and ultimately make everything

*Many thanks to
our players & friends
worldwide.
...And special thanks
to these reviewers who
took the time to GET
what we do.*

"this is ballsy, fat stuff, perfect for classic AC/DC-type rhythm, through Page and Cream-era /Clapton leads,"

Guitar Buyer—May 2005

"The overdrive this voicing delivers with valve rectification switched in has to be heard to be believed, it's almost unreal compared to any other amp apart from a Rectifier."

Guitarist—Feb./Mar. 2005

easy for the player to understand and use."

Guitar Player—June 2005

"Randall Smith has more experience designing high-gain amps than anyone else on the planet, and the Stiletto is the culmination of his more than 35 years in the amplifier business. Big-league stuff indeed."

Guitar Player—June 2005

"Mesa's new Stiletto Deuce and Stiletto Trident amplifiers continue in the tradition of Smith's legendary creations. With their ripping EL34 power sections and high-octane six-mode preamps, the all-tube Stilettos may reshape existing notions of British-style aggression and tone."

Guitar World—2005

"Mesa amps don't just sound amazing; they're also handsomely dressed"

Guitar World—2005

"Immense volume, balls, grind and punch are just four reasons why you won't believe your ears."

Guitar Buyer—May 2005

"Like all Mesa products, the Stiletto's appearance is a perfect example of how to do it right."

Guitar Buyer—May 2005

"A stellar amplifier head, very rewarding to play through. The hand-built-structure is uncompromising in terms of strength, looks and quality."

Guitarist Australia—Feb./Mar. 2005

"All in all, it's another awesome weapon from the undisputed king of high-performance guitar amplification. Don't miss it."

Guitarist—Feb./Mar. 2005



GUITARBUYER

Guitarist

Guitarist
Australia

TONESMITH

MESA BOOGIE

THE EDITED HIGHLIGHTS

1969: Randall Smith guts, then rebuilds a seriously hot-rodded Fender Princeton. Carlos Santana hears it and utters the immortal words, "Shit man. That little thing really Boogies!" Word spreads fast, Randy builds plenty more.

1972: The first amplifier with cascading gain debuts: The Boogie Mark I.

1980: The first modern channel-switching amplifier: The Mark IIA. IIB model follows in '82 with the first ever effects loop. Mark Series continues to evolve, culminating in the immense Mark IV of 1989.

1991: Mesa introduces the Rectifier series, and redefines the sound of rock music again. Lots more amps follow throughout the 1990s

2002: The Road King offers four channels, different assignable power tube types, output levels and speaker cabs

2005: Hello Stiletto – see the previous pages

For the full story, see Mesa's website, www.mesaaboogie.com



MESA BOOGIE'S FOUNDER TAKES TIME FOR A CHAT

... **Randall Smith is the founder and designer of Mesa Boogie amplifiers. From the first Boogie-modded Fender Princetons, all the way through Mark Series amps right up to the latest Rectos, Randy has brought you the lot. The latest amp from the Mesa 'Home Of Tone' is the Stiletto (reviewed on the previous pages), so we took the opportunity to ask him about his new baby.**

GB: How did the concept for the Stiletto come about?

Randall Smith: "We were interested in making a sonically compatible 'partner' for the Rectifier, especially for bands with two guitars. We wanted to enable each player to carve out and OWN a niche in the spectrum such that the individual sounds were distinctive, identifiable and ultimately compatible.

"Using EL-34 power tubes put us on the path toward tones that are distinctive from, yet complimentary to the 6L6s used in the Rectifiers. Both the dynamic and harmonic characteristics of these two tubes are quite different. Where the 6L6es have massive, airy low end that seems to emanate from the center of the earth, the EL-34s, by cutting off that 'sub-sonic' octave, are more tightly focused and punchy. Their frequency response goes to the bottom of the musical spectrum and stops there. But the 6L6s just keep going, almost gathering momentum as they drop below the lowest musical frequencies – kind of suggesting the movement of tectonic plates far beneath the earth's surface! And moving this kind of heft makes them slower and less urgent than the EL-34s.

The high-end distortion characteristics are also way different. The ELs have a fine crystalline granularity that pokes out above the presence region where the 6L6es are smoother and less peaky. They actually go higher even though that harmonic peak of the EL makes them seem brighter.

The job was to develop circuitry that accentuated these different characteristics and took them further out, while paying homage to the classic ancestry of British amplification."

Were you concerned about cannibalizing the market for the Dual Rectifier series?

"No, not really. For some players, the Rectifier is just right; for others, it isn't. We wanted to offer something for those other guys.

"One of the hippest things about what we get to do is that different amplifiers create different musical styles. You can play a lot of different musical styles on a piano, and yet the instrument always sounds the same. But you can take one guitar and, depending on the amp you use and how you set it, totally different musical styles are suggested and become possible. It's the AMP that's setting the style and in many cases DEFINING the style. With the Stiletto we're just offering another sonic palette to play with."

How different is the Stiletto to a Dual Rec in terms of the circuit?

"Well, there are lots of similarities, but when you look close, everything is different, often substantially different. For example, we amassed a PILE of prototype transformers, both power and output, before we were satisfied. They may look like Recto transformers, but everything inside is different – same thing with the circuitry. You can see familiar bits here and there but on a closer look, everything is different. Remember, most everything can be traced back to the original source, which for both amps is the four-ten Bassman. And that's pretty much like tracing all hot-rods, race cars (and most modern cars) back to the '32 Ford with a flat-head V-8 – The fabled 'Deuce Coupe'. I like to give credit to the original source, because NONE of us would be doing amps otherwise. And yet... everything is different."



Are there technical barriers to making the Stiletto's modes footswitchable, or is there another reason they're non-switchable options?

"Making the modes footswitchable would put us on the slippery-slope toward compromised performance. You would need to re-set the controls in order to dial-in the optimum tone for each sound. So if we had made them footswitchable you would then want to have a separate gain control, then you would need another master, and at least a treble, but better a whole 'nother tone stack. And actually, the presence is kind of crucial to getting it just right... See what I mean?"

Anything else you'd like to add?

"Yes. Thanks. For the opportunity we're given by guitarists to do something we love. I'm speaking for myself, Doug [West], Jim [Aschow], Steve [Mueller], Tien [Lawrence] and the Mesa/Boogie crew.

"There's a circular reinforcement, not just among ourselves but with the whole world of guitar players out there. We often talk about how fortunate we are to be doing something we love and the positive feedback we keep getting just pushes us to go for it even more. Just like hitting a great groove on the bandstand and getting that audience feedback.

So, Thanks, thanks again!" **GB**





ZOOM

The included footswitch controls channel switching and Solo boost functions.

MESA/BOOGIE

STILETTO DEUCE AND TRIDENT

TESTED BY TERRY BUDDINGH

British amp companies began using EL34 output tubes in the mid 1960s, and these distinctive-sounding “valves” have contributed greatly to many of the coolest tones in guitar history. Now Mesa/Boogie’s new Stiletto Deuce and Trident amplifiers—both of which come loaded with a bank of these feisty fire bottles—pay homage to the classic British-voiced tones of the past, while also offering an abundance of innovative sound-sculpting features that encourage you to explore and create your own personalized tones.

Unlike some previous Mesa/Boogies that could accommodate EL34s as an alternate tube type, the Stiletto Deuce and Trident are the company’s first amps to be optimized exclusively for EL34s (four in the Deuce, and six in the Trident). While many of their features are similar to those found on previous M/B designs, the Stiletto Deuce and Trident are much more than recycled Rectifiers or Road Kings. In fact, the Stiletto circuitry was designed and fine-tuned to provide a more cutting sonic identity that’s specifically intended to *contrast* with a Rectifier’s legendary corpulence. That contrast is especially valuable if you play in a two-guitar band that thrives on heavy high-gain tones and textures.

CUTTING-EDGE CLASSIC

A manufacturer’s sincerity of purpose is reflected in its commitment to quality and attention to detail, and Mesa/Boogie has been an industry leader in this regard for decades. Soft-spoken details such as the Stiletto’s tight-fitting *leather* corner caps, Harley-worthy chromed-steel top and front vents, arrow-straight piping, and cast-metal nameplates speak volumes about the

builder’s design and craftsmanship. You have to admire Mesa/Boogie’s sense of style, too. The Stiletto Deuce and Trident flaunt a badass downtown look via leather front panels that are treated with a special simulated-crocodile embossing process, and further emphasized by a wickedly cool crossed-blade logo.

In addition to this understated street-wise elegance, there are some other subtle exterior details that reveal Mesa/Boogie’s commitment to road-proof durability. For example, the front panel’s mini-toggles have bump-resistant stubby metal handles, and the heavy-duty power switches and skirted knobs are deeply recessed to protect them from impact.

Representative of Mesa/Boogie’s long-standing concern for serviceability, the rugged metal Switchcraft Input and Footswitch jacks, and all of the front-panel control pots (which have stubby solid-metal shafts to minimize breakage), are tightly secured to the front panel and wired with flying leads. Besides facilitating future replacement of these components, this type of construction provides industrial-strength reliability as it mechanically isolates the circuit boards and their solder joints from front-panel stresses.

It’s obvious from these precautionary measures, that the folks at Mesa/Boogie have seen first-hand the results of every form of road abuse imaginable. And they obviously apply this experience to help their amps survive not only the harsh reality of professional touring, but the more torturous day-in/day-out car-trunk existence of the club-, bar-, and wedding-band circuit.

A closer peak underneath the Stiletto’s chrome-plated welded-steel chassis



INSTANT GRATIFICATION
MESA/BOOGIE
STILETTO DEUCE
AND TRIDENT

WHO'S IT FOR?

Players seeking a wide range of EL34-fueled tones that embrace both the past and the future.

KUDOS

Tons of hip features. An astounding range of tantalizing tones. Road-proven durability.

CONCERNS

None.

PRICE

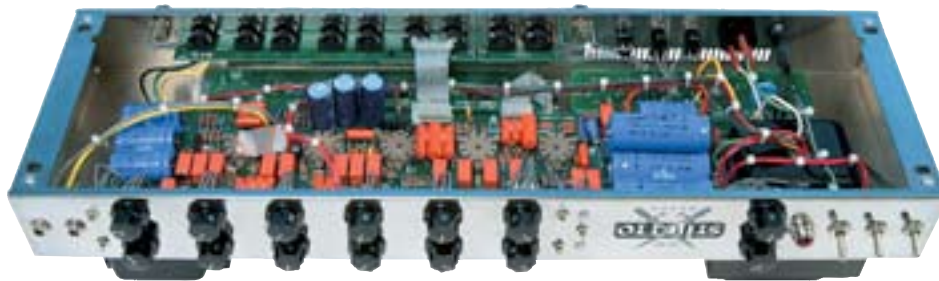
Stiletto Deuce:
\$1,599 retail
Street price N/A

Stiletto Trident:
\$1,699 retail
Street price N/A

CONTACT

Mesa/Boogie,
(707) 778-6565;
mesaboogie.com

EDITORS' PICK
AWARD



Industrial art: The Stiletto's clean layout and road-proof construction clearly reflect Mesa/Boogie's three-and-a-half decades of hard-won amp building experience.

ZOOM

MESA/BOOGIE RECTIFIER TRADITIONAL SLANT 4X12

After testing both Stilettoes with a wide variety of cabs, I became extremely impressed by how the focused and punchy sounding Rectifier Traditional slant 4x12 speaker cabinet (\$849 retail/street price N/A) enhanced the Stiletto's aggressive nature. The Rectifier Traditional cabs have the same dimensions as a "traditional" Marshall 4x12, and are smaller than Boogie's oversized Rectifier Standard cabs.

While the larger Standard cabs complement the huge-sounding Rectifier heads—and together they produce massive low-end girth—the smaller Traditional cabs have a tighter low-end, with more midrange "poke."

The test cab came loaded with Mesa/Boogie's proprietary Vintage 30 8Ω speakers, which, according to Mesa/Boogie's Doug West, provide a crisper attack and tighter sound compared to the 16Ω Vintage 30s commonly found in 4x12 cabinets. Most Celestion speakers are now assembled in China, but Mesa/Boogie's are still made in England using old-fashioned air-dried adhesives, instead of modern fast-drying types. (Different adhesives have different weights and other properties, and speakers can be sensitive to these subtle tone-altering differences.)

As with Mesa/Boogie's other cabs, the Rectifier Traditionals are built from 14-ply Baltic birch, with durable steel handles and jack plate, cool leather corner protectors, and M/B's smooth-rolling custom Track-Loc casters. In addition, the jack plate has extra inputs that allow you to split the left and right speaker pairs for stereo or bi-amped operation. —TB

revealed a surprising abundance of neatly laid-out components that testified to the circuit's high level of design sophistication. Nearly two dozen relays perform various circuit-tweaking functions in response to channel Mode changes and other feature selections. A component-level circuit analysis revealed complex relay-controlled circuit reconfigurations and alterations at every pre-amp stage: gain stages are added, bypassed, or rerouted, while various tone-shaping networks are engaged to alter the amp's frequency response and optimize its performance for each selection. The subtlety—as well as the magnitude—of these changes clearly reflects the countless hours spent fine-tuning the Stiletto's circuits. It takes an incredible amount of time to create an amp with this much tonal range and flexibility, and then hone each circuit reconfiguration to perfection, and ultimately make everything easy for the player to understand and use. This ain't no kitchen-table project. Mesa/Boogie's Randall Smith has more experience designing high-gain amps than anyone else on the planet, and the Stiletto is the culmination of his more than 35 years in the amplifier business. Big-league stuff indeed.

THEY SLICE, DICE, AND A WHOLE LOT MORE

The Stilettoes have two independent channels, each featuring a 3-position Mode switch that affects gain and voicing (more on this later), as well as a switch that reconfigures the output stage for full power or 50-watt (two tube) operation. (The Deuce has four EL34s, so full power is labeled 100 watts, and the six-tube Trident's full-power setting is labeled 150 watts.) This assignability is a really cool feature, as it enables you to configure the output stage to deliver smooth, low-power lead-tone compression, or mighty low-end impact with brutally taut headroom and dynamic range.

This dynamic contrast can be further

enhanced via the assignable rectifier types. Rear-panel toggle switches select either tube or solid-state rectifiers (the Deuce has two 5U4GBEH rectifier tubes, and the Trident has three). And if you're looking for even more deeply burnished '40s- or '50s-style low-voltage looseness, the global Bold/Spongy switch reduces the amp's operating voltages by about 20 percent when set to the Spongy position. An amp's dynamic response is a critical, yet often neglected component of great tone, so props to Mesa/Boogie for exploring new ways of manipulating this essential performance characteristic.

TO NE A LA MODE

The powerful Mode functions are keys to the Stiletto's tonal treasures. For example, Channel 1's Tite Clean setting faithfully recreates vintage circuit topology to provide a wide range of classic '60s- and '70s-era British tones that work well with both thick-sounding humbuckers and lean single-coil pickups. By using different Gain, rectifier, power amp, and Bold/Spongy settings, you can easily conjure Clapton's Blues Breakers snarl, Hendrix's psychedelic screams, Gibbons' grind, and many other fabled Brit-amp textures. In fact, it was easy for me to clone the sound of both a '74 50-watt Marshall non-master head and an Orange Rockerverb 100. The Stilettoes would be impressive if they had only this one channel and Mode, but we're just getting started.

Channel 1's Fat Clean setting substitutes a completely re-voiced first gain stage that can make the skinniest-sounding Tele bridge pickup as plump as a Christmas goose. The Crunch position adds another preamp gain stage to closely approximate a post-1975 master-volume Marshall model 2203/4's higher-gain circuitry. This mode sounded wickedly bright with a vintage-style Strat, but possessed just the right amount of expressive top-end bite to make

a humbucker-equipped PRS McCarty sound simultaneously sweet and vicious.

More modern tones await those who dare to explore the higher-gain realms of Channel 2. For those who just can't get enough JCM 800-inspired glory, Channel 2 begins by replicating Channel 1's highest-gain Crunch mode. The next setting, Tite Gain, displays some modern Mesa/Boogie influence, with a searing presence and stinging attack that begs for 'buckers, while its energized top-end sizzle sounds able to disintegrate anything that gets in its way. Channel 2's aptly named Fluid Drive position activates four preamp gain stages to provide the amp's most extreme levels of overdrive. In contrast to the Stiletto's brighter modes, Fluid Drive is super thick and rich, with a velvet-veiled low-end growl and a warm and viscous top end. It sounds great with single-coils and absolutely luscious with humbuckers.

CUT TO THE CHASE

Any way you slice it, the Stiletto stand

proud in Mesa/Boogie's storied legacy of relentlessly innovative amp designs. Whether you're considering the 50/100-watt Deuce, or are intrigued by the Trident's additional power and percussive thrust, either of these new sonic weapons would be a worthy addition to even the most formidable and complete amp arsenal. Dressed to impress, brilliantly conceived, and finely honed, the Stiletto's pay homage to the past without denying the future—or breaking your bank account. Amidst the current abundance of high-priced one-tone wonders, the Stiletto's are an absolutely astounding value—especially when you consider their high level of design sophistication and innovation, remarkable fit and finish, and almost embarrassing wealth of innovative features and great tones. The Stiletto's represent another high-water mark as Mesa/Boogie continues to pursue the leading edge of modern amp design. This is going to be a hard act to follow, so take a bow Mesa/Boogie, and here's your Editors' Pick Award. 🎸

SPECS

- Two footswitchable channels
- Three modes per channel
- Assignable output wattage and rectifier types
- Bypassable FX loop with adjustable Send and Output levels
- Footswitchable Solo level control
- Slave output with level control
- Bold/Spongy high/low voltage switch
- Five Mesa/Boogie 12AX7EH preamp tubes
- Mesa/Boogie EL34EH output tubes (four in the 100-watt Deuce, six in the 150-watt Trident)
- Mesa/Boogie 5U4GBEH rectifier tubes (two in Deuce, three in Trident)

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Stiletto Deuce head with optional purple suede finish

SOUNDCHECK

testing 1...2...3... cheap thrills nuts&bolts playing the market the buzz bin alive&gigging tech education new eq audiofile

TESTING 1...2...3...

THE GEAR IN REVIEW

A CUT ABOVE

Mesa Stiletto Deuce and Stiletto Trident amplifiers

By Eric Kirkland

RANDALL SMITH will be forever linked with the concept of high gain. The founder of Mesa/Boogie, Smith invented the first high-gain amplifier in the early Seventies in an effort to fulfill Carlos Santana's request for an amp that would produce near infinite sustain. Some 20 years later, in 1991, Smith scored another success when his Dual Rectifier, a monster of tuned and tuneful distortion, became the sound for a new generation of hard rock guitarists.

Mesa's new Stiletto Deuce and Stiletto Trident amplifiers continue in the tradition of Smith's legendary creations. With their ripping EL34 power sections and high-octane six-mode preamps, the all-tube Stilettoes may reshape existing notions of British-style aggression and tone.

Features

Mesa amps don't just sound amazing; they're also handsomely dressed, with consideration to their individual tonal personalities. The Stilettoes come stock with cabinets wrapped in black vinyl and face panels whose black crocodile-embossed leather suggests the ferocious personas within. Chrome control panels and vents enhance the amps' bulletproof look. These brothers-in-arms differ only in their output levels and the number of tubes



in their power sections: the Deuce uses two pair of EL34s to create 100 watts, while the Trident links six EL34s, for 150 watts of stage-dominating power. For that reason, the comments in this review pertain to both models, unless stated otherwise.

The preamp's two channels each have three modes. Channel 1's consist of Fat Clean, Tite Clean and Crunch, which as a group deliver crystalline EL34-style rhythm tones at one end and heinous U.K.-style overdrive at the other. Channel 2 continues the sonic assault with modes for Crunch, Tite Gain and Fluid Drive, the latter delivering a previously unheard level of aggressive overdrive. Each channel has separate controls for master, presence, bass, mid, treble and gain and a short-throw mini toggle that,

when thrown, reduces the output to 50 watts, allowing you to tailor the power rating to suit your style.

The popular Bold/Spongy switch typically featured on the back of Mesa amps is located next to the power and standby toggles. It lets you run the amp at full power or reduce the internal voltages for a classic "brown" tone and looser feel. Solo and output controls let you set the level of footswitchable solo boost and the amplifier's overall output, respectively. Finally, an input for the included footswitch is provided on the front panel, next to the guitar input.

The Stilettoes' rear panel comprises multiple speaker outs, a slave out with level control, channel and solo external switching jacks for connecting the amp to a switching system, and channel-specific switches for tube or silicon-diode rectifier operation. The tube-driven series effect loop has a send level

control and a hard-bypass switch that, when engaged, disengages the solo and output controls.

Performance

I stacked the Deuce and Trident Stilettoes on top of a Mesa Traditional Recto cabinet and connected them to the cab with MIT Hardwire speaker cable. Like standard Rectifier cabinets, the Traditional cab is loaded with Vintage 30 Celestion speakers, but its somewhat smaller dimensions give it a tighter and more focused tone.

For the most elastic tone possible, I began my tests with both heads in the channel 1 Fat Clean mode, using

THE FINE PRINT

MODEL	STILETTO DEUCE	STILETTO TRIDENT
INPUTS	Instrument, footswitch, external switching for channel and solo	Instrument, footswitch, external switching for channel and solo
OUTPUTS	Two four-ohm and two eight-ohm speaker jacks, slave out	Two four-ohm and two eight-ohm speaker jacks, slave out
CHANNELS	Two, with six modes	Two, with six modes
CONTROLS	Post master output and solo; independent master, presence, bass, mid, treble and gain	Post master output and solo; independent master, presence, bass, mid, treble and gain
EFFECT LOOP	Series, hard bypass	Series, hard bypass
PEDAL BOARD	Channel-switching and solo feature	Channel-switching and solo feature
PREAMP	Tube, five 12AX7s	Tube, five 12AX7s
POWER AMP	Tube, four EL34s	Tube, six EL34s
POWER OUTPUT	100 or 50 watts, channel-assignable power	150 or 50 watts, channel-assignable power
MATCHING CABINET TYPE	Recto Traditional 4x12 with Celestion Vintage 30s	Recto Traditional 4x12 with Celestion Vintage 30s
OTHER FEATURES	Bold/Spongy power options, switchable tube or silicon-diode rectifiers	Bold/Spongy power options, switchable tube or silicon-diode rectifiers



tube rectification and spongy power. Setting the Deuce at full power with relatively low gain produced consistently sweet-and-thick notes from my DiMarzio-equipped Strat. Bent notes were smooth and deep, without any of the thin character that plagues many EL34-based clean sounds.

Switching to Tite Clean and upping each amp's response time with bold power and silicon-diode rectifiers produced a leaner tone than the Fat mode, but with more immediacy and resolve. Channel 1's Crunch mode was simply nasty and raw, with an old-school delivery like a smack in the face. Using the gain and presence controls primarily, I was able to hone the tone to a razor-sharp edge or smooth it for a blunt and crushing attack.

Channel 2's Crunch mode was the first stop on my voyage through high-gain territory. It's thicker than channel 1's Crunch mode, with a wider voice and a more commanding attitude. Next, I pumped the Tite Gain mode with my EMG-loaded custom Charvel. Its radical EL34 tone had all the

cocky attitude of a back-alley London fighter, cutting through the mix with low midrange brilliance and snarling presence.

Fluid Drive mode brought all of the Stiletto's gain to bear. A combination of violent distortion and demonic overtones, it displayed none of the brash high end associated with EL34s. While

the tones were essentially identical from both amps, the higher power Trident gets

THE RAZOR'S EDGE:
(left) rear view of the Trident;
(right) the Trident's 50/150
power-rating mini toggles

my vote for its immense headroom, brick-busting bass and extreme energy.

KA-CHING!
PRO NET FACTORY DISCOUNTED PRICES:
Stiletto Deuce, \$1,599.00;
Stiletto Trident, \$1,699.00;
Recto Traditional 4x12, \$849.00
MANUFACTURER:
Mesa/Boogie, 1317 Ross St., Petaluma, CA 94954; (707) 778-6565; mesaboogie.com

The Bottom Line

The extremely versatile six-mode Stiletto cast a lush harmonic haze over the classic EL34 tones while punching into a deviant new world of defiant British manners. For most, the two-fisted attack of the 100-watt Deuce will provide an instant knockout. But if you're the type of player that needs brain-busting bass, colossal power depth and unparalleled definition, the Trident's 150 watts will elevate your tone into Mesa's unique stratosphere of EL34 clarity and gain. ■

PRO: Range of tones, flawless build quality and groundbreaking EL34 attitude

CON: None



THE HEELER

TO COMPLEMENT THE COMPANY'S RECTIFIER SERIES, MESA UNVEILS AN EL34-DRIVEN MONSTER FOR BRIT-LEANING TONES. **MICK TAYLOR** WONDERS WHERE IT ALL WENT RIGHT YET AGAIN

GBINFO

MESA STILETTO DEUCE

BUILT IN: USA

TYPE: All-valve head

POWER: 100 watts (switchable to 50)

VALVES: 5 x 12AX7 (preamp, FX loop and phase splitter), 4 x EL34 (power), 2 x 5U4G (rectifiers)

FEATURES: Dual independent channels, each with three modes and independently switchable 50/100-watt output and channel-selectable vacuum tube or solid-state rectification; footswitchable 'solo' master; 'hold/spongy' in-built power attenuator; hard-bypass parallel effects loop with level control; slave output with level control; two 4- and two 8-ohm speaker outs

FOOTSWITCH: Mesa two-button for channel and solo included

FINISHES: Either black with black croc front panel and 'zinc bronco' (shown) as standard

DIMENSIONS: 245(h) x 650(w) x 255(d) mm

WEIGHT: 19.5kg

412 RECTO STANDARD SLANT CABINET

TYPE: 4x12 extension speaker cabinet

SPEAKERS: Four 12-inch Celestion Vintage 30

POWER HANDLING: 280 watts

DIMENSIONS: 915(h, with castors) x 760(w) x 360(d, max) mm

WEIGHT: 48.5kg

CONTACT: Mesa Boogie

WEB: www.mesa-boogie.com

Hard to believe that it's now 35 years since the world saw the first Boogie. Originally an experiment to give a 12-watt Fender Princeton a huge new pair of tonal balls, the brand has since blossomed under the leadership of founder Randall Smith into the world's leading manufacturer of high-quality amplifiers. The original 'boutique' builder, many of the company's innovations such as cascading gain and channel switching are now taken for granted among today's players.

In 1991, Mesa Boogie took a dramatic change of tack. Previously most associated with compact, super-powerful, feature-packed amps (Mark I, II, III & IV), Smith and co diversified into massive, super-powerful, feature-packed amps – the Dual and Triple Rectifiers. These monsters refocused Boogie's hi-gain heritage for a new generation of players, and in so doing helped define a whole new genre of modern rock playing with their immense gain, grind and low thump.

Yet the 6L6-driven Rectifiers with their three-channel operation don't suit everybody, most obviously Marshall devotees who require fewer bells and whistles, and crucially, the sound and response of an exclusively EL34 power section for its tighter, more focused bass. Ladies and gentlemen, behold the Stiletto...

PRE & POWER AMP

We can almost take Boogie build quality as read these days. There's no other volume manufacturer of amps who has maintained such consistently excellent standards, and this Stiletto is no exception. Custom components throughout, meticulous design and execution – I've watched these things being built, and 'fastidious' barely comes close to the care given to every single chassis, every single amp.

As a result of their huge flexibility, Mesa's later Mark Series amps (III & IV) picked up a 'too complicated' stigma in certain circles during the late 1980s and early '90s. On the DC-3, 5 and 10 amps in 1990, this was addressed with two rows of identical controls, one for each channel, and it's this logical layout – straight up, one above the other – on which the Stiletto is based. Each channel has three different modes to suit a wide variety of styles (read more about them in 'Sounds') that goes from high-headroom clean, to outright filth across the two channels. Which ones you like best will depend very much on your chosen guitar and musical tastes, more of which later.

As with all Mesas, the gain, tone and presence controls are all highly interactive, meaning that slight tweaks – particularly treble and presence – make for significant tonal changes that mean all the difference between a sound you can barely live with, and

one you truly love. In that respect it's worth reading the manual, into which has poured a lot of time and effort. Some of what it says will be counter-intuitive if you've not owned a Boogie before, so it's essential reading to realise the potential of your Stiletto.

For the power section, Mesa has based this whole amp around a quartet of EL34 power tubes, famous of course for their use in most classic Marshall heads. In addition, you have the option in either channel of switching out two tubes for 50 watts output – let's say you like a high-headroom, 100-watt clean channel, but a soaked, 50-watt dirty channel, for example – and also the option of valve rectification, again, selectable in either or both channels – see the box on page 114. And if that's not enough, you even get Mesa's proprietary 'bold/spongy' switch on the front panel which acts like a built-in Variac (down by around 20 per cent) to attenuate the power for saggier, more compressed power-amp response.

Add a collection of speaker outs – Mesa encourages you to experiment with the eight- and four-ohm output loads into eight- and 16-ohm cabinets to alter the timbre further – and a level-controllable direct feed for external power amp hook ups, and that's pretty much everything you need to know about the top, before plugging straight in to...

STILETTO

MESA
ENGINEERING

CH 1 100W
CH 2 100W
FTSW 50W
MASTER
PRESENCE
BASS

GBOPINION

MESA STILETTO DEUCE & 412 RECTO CAB

GOLD STARS

- ★ Amazing versatility... That manages to serve up stunning tones
- ★ Superb build quality
- ★ Easy to use

BLACK MARKS

- Yep – three times the price of a Marshall DSL100

IDEAL FOR...

Any pro-minded rock guitarist who wants incredible tone, plenty of versatility and the envy of all those who don't, won't or can't

CABINET & SPEAKER

...Mesa's venerable Recto 4x12 enclosure. A 4x12 is a 4x12 is a 4x12, right? Wrong. This utter beast is a good deal larger than a standard Marshall 1960A, for example, and is home to four Celestion Vintage 30 drivers which makes it a good deal heavier too. Oh joy. To be honest though, once you've tried a Recto cab – even given the eye-watering expense – you'll wonder how you did without one, such is the thunderous slam and almost brutal efficiency with which they deliver your sound. I've often A/B'd a 2x12 Recto with 'lesser' 4x12 cabs to the astonishment of unsuspecting now-converts, and like

that little brother, this big boy is more often than not plenty louder and fatter. Despite otherwise superb build – expertly joined marine-grade birch ply with flush recessed side handles and heavy-duty castors – our one persistent criticism is the leather corners that can get knocked off.

It's possible to use the cab straight mono, or 140+140-watt stereo, and link up another should you so desire. Swathed in one of two finishes to match the head – this is a dark grey/silver/black 'zinc bronco', there's also a black leatherette/croc skin front panel offering – you'd have to admit it looks every bit the awesome rig.

SOUNDS

A quick flick around the available modes and you soon discover how wildly varying the resultant tones are in terms of gain and EQ. Depending on your pickups, you may find it necessary, for example, to roll the bass control all the way off in channel one's 'fat clean' mode to lose all the flabbiness. The Stiletto manual even suggests you do this, and rather than bemoan the use of 'extreme' settings – which your brain intuitively doesn't like – it's more use to point out that these lower extremes are necessary to explore the Stiletto's full versatility.

And by god is it versatile. For all its rock bravado, the 'tight clean' mode in channel one, and 'fat clean' for that matter, treat a Strat to some funky, high-headroom tones that even with the Recto 412 sound breathy. Increase the gain and we're into vintage-style break up that you can tame with the

powerful presence control, before hitting channel one's 'crunch' mode to send things really Hendrixy. Things get very biting, so again, judicious use of treble and presence is advised.

Staying with the channel one 'crunch' mode, there's enough gain, driven by a bridge 'bucker, to get way past cooking Marshall Plexi or even JCM800 territory. Like the 'pushed' mode in the 50-watt Single Rectifier head, this is ballsy, fat stuff, perfect for classic AC/DC-type rhythm, through Page and Cream-era Clapton leads, and on to more modern Brit voices as you crank the gain and maybe tame the mids. Speaking personally, I could live with this channel alone.

There is a whole other side to the Stiletto however, and the more I take it out to gigs, the more I like it. Initial, very low volume impressions seem somewhat fizzy and lacking in grunt, but get up to operating temperature and this channel is a real gem. The temptation can be to go for the 'fluid drive' mode with its massive gain and thundering bottom end. This is lovely for endless sustain, single-note lead stuff, though can get a bit overpowering for rhythm work. Flicking down a gain stage to 'tite gain' brings in the bottom end for a grinding, quick-response tone that'll cut through any mix with authority, while down again to 'crunch' (replicated from channel one) takes the process further back towards classic rock.

And just in case you were wondering... if you've only heard simulations of a modern detuned

LOOP THE (NO) LOOP

SWITCH IT OUT IF YOU DON'T WANT IT

■ Like Mesa's Lone Star amp, the Stiletto features a hard-bypass effects loop. This means that if you don't want to use it – loops always rob something of the pure tone, even (and perhaps especially) in high-end amps – simply switch it out and it's totally removed from the circuit, linking you straight to the channel masters which become your master volumes.

With it switched in – use the level control to boost or cut if necessary – you also have use

of the master and solo volumes. Solo, gives you an extra switchable level above the master for lead breaks or for extra loud passages: footswitch included.



TIME TO RECTIFY

TUBES AND SILICON – WE ARE BLESSED

■ Introduced first on Mesa's Dual Rectifier series, the Stiletto also features switchable valve or solid-state rectification.

A rectifier is the part of the amp that converts AC incoming current, to the DC required by the amp's power section. Valve rectifiers are less efficient than their solid-state successors, and so usually impart saggy, compressing characteristics to a suitably cooking power stage as they struggle to deliver the juice immediately, the instant you hit your note or chord. This is what gives amps such as Vox's AC30 and certain vintage Fenders their compressed feel at high volume, rounding out the initial attack of notes.

While this is great for vintage-type sounds, modern rock requires the altogether punchier, higher headroom and more aggressive attack that solid-

state rectification provides. You'll be pleased to know the Stiletto gives you both options, courtesy of two 5U4GB tubes – one for 50 watts, the pair for 100. Even better, they're channel assignable so you can have any combination of tube and solid-state rectification between channels.



DETAILS

FOR OUR MONEY AT LEAST, THIS IS THE BEST MESA – ALONG WITH THE LONE STAR – IN OVER A DECADE



The controls' simple arrangement helps here



Every aspect of Mesa's work is excellent

GBCONCLUSION

THE MESA THAT A CERTAIN BRITISH COMPANY MAY WISH NEVER EXISTED

There is a breed of rock guitar player for whom three channels – and their associated myriad controls – is at least one too many. Said rockers are also highly likely to favour a certain script-typeface brand, also beginning with 'M' as their number one amplifier of choice.

If that sounds like you (and you have the budget – we're talking three times the price of a Marshall DSL100) we'd urge you to try a Mesa Stiletto right away. It takes the classic British sound as its base, then builds on it with extra balls, gain and astounding flexibility for literally any style of rock. Not only that, if you've tried a Mesa Dual Rectifier and found it, well, not for you, then all the more reason to seek this out. It's easier to use and instantly more gratifying in terms of straight-up classic rock tones, and for my money at least, is the best new Mesa in over a decade. Expect to see them everywhere. **GB**

hard rock/metal sound, do yourself a favour and go listen to this at volume. Immense volume, balls, grind and punch are just four reasons why you won't believe your ears.

There are subtleties too. Perhaps the crucial make-or-break attribute of any amplifier is how it responds at your usual playing volume and pick attack. Doubtless many of you will be able to relate to that experience where you're at a gig and somehow your tone seems either too clanky and forthright with little natural sustain; or conversely, too squashy and getting lost among the band's general hubris. With the Stiletto, careful combination of the switchable tube rectification, 100/50-watt power setting and 'bold/spongy' switch all but eliminates those issues for live and recording work. Using

tube rectifiers, 50 watts and spongy, for example, rounds everything out of the initial pick attack of a power chord, and browns it off for a soaked-style distortion that gains life, colour and masses of sustain as the note decays. With the solid-state rectifier switched in, at 100 watts, using the 'bold' setting and playing exactly the same thing, you now hear the edge of the pick hit the strings, whereupon you're greeted with an immediate kick in the chest as the full brutal assault finds nothing to get in its way. To experience the full potential of these features, you have to be playing at significant volume, and preferably with a band to appreciate what a difference this makes to your tone and playing.

My guess is that you'll settle on a combination that suits your own playing style, though if you find yourself at a gig and the tone needs a tweak, experiment with these before you leap for the volume or EQ controls: you'll be surprised.

GBRATINGS

MESA STILETTO DEUCE & 412 RECTO CAB

PRE & POWER AMP	★★★★★
CAB & SPEAKERS	★★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
GBVERDICT	★★★★★



Mesa Engineering Stiletto Deuce head

British tone, American style, and to hell with the overdraft: Mesa's first dedicated EL34-powered amp makes its debut right here by Nick Guppy



If you're into fast cars, then the debut of a new Ferrari or Lamborghini is something worth waiting for: the excitement of reading the first test drive results, watching it driven by your favourite TV pundit, maybe even seeing it on the road for the first time. Of course, that doesn't compare to getting behind the wheel of one, especially if you own it. Luckily for us guitarists, high performance amplification is a lot cheaper than an Italian supercar, but the

One thing's for certain – if the Rectifier doesn't define the sound of the next rock revolution, the Stiletto probably will

thrill can be just as much fun.

Randall Smith, whose legendary designs have been raising the hairs on

guitar players' necks for over 35 years, has always been a stalwart supporter of the 6L6 output valve. In fact, Mesa Engineering is reportedly the world's biggest single buyer of 6L6s, so the arrival of the first Mesa amp totally dedicated to the altogether different EL34 is almost as much of a surprise as Ferrari announcing a car that runs on diesel. Several Mesa designs have featured the EL34 as an option over the years, from Simulclass Boogies to the



latest Roadking, but designing an amp specifically for the pentode that's synonymous with British hi-gain rock is a bold move for Randall – and a big occasion for us.

Like all Mesa products, the Stiletto's appearance is a perfect example of how to do it right – take one simple black box and accessorise with fittings in a way that gives it an identity; something that you'll recognise even if there isn't a badge on it. Many amp cabinets are 18mm thick but the slimmer 15mm ply Boogie uses here is just as tough and avoids the chunky, utilitarian look that's so common today. The leather corners and vertical grilles, which repeat on the front, top and rear, echo the mighty Rectifier and complement the Stiletto's chrome control panels. On this sample, the heavy crocodile-embossed leather front is a neat contrast to the black vinyl wrapping the cabinet sides. But you can specify almost anything you like if you're prepared to wait for it. Mesa Boogie was arguably the original boutique amp builder and still offers a wide range of custom finish options.

Inside the chassis there's one big printed circuit board, which holds most of the electronics, with smaller ones for the power valve bases, rear jack sockets and power supply. The front panel components are still connected by flying



The Stiletto allows you to run either channel at half-power

STILETTO DEUCE HEAD	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The best range of British rock guitar sounds ever packed into one amp

■ **WE DISLIKED** The fluid drive voicing is a little noisy at extreme gain settings

leads for reliability and ease of servicing, something that Randall has retained all the way back from the original Mark I Boogie days. Mesa's printed circuit boards have a unique look as they're hand-drawn by the man himself. The Stiletto's is no exception, with neatly radiused corners and occasionally quirky routing that reminds you of the human element that makes these amps distinctly different from other mass-produced designs. There are no less than 17 relays on the main board, indicating some serious switching tricks behind the scenes.

Despite this, the control panels are easy to navigate without referring back to the manual. The front panel is a double-decker arrangement with identical sets of channel controls and global master and solo volume knobs. Each channel has a three-position voice switch. Channel one's choices are Fat Clean, Tite Clean or Crunch; this last option is cloned on channel two with the addition of Tite Gain or Fluid Drive. At the other end of the channel controls you'll find separate full or half-power switches, with a third toggle for changing channels, while next to the mains and standby there's a bold/spongy switch that Recto fans will be familiar with. The spongy option drops the internal voltages for a more dynamic feel, whilst

bold is full power and stand well back.

On the rear panel there's even more flexibility to play with. In half-power mode, the rectifier tracking option lets you automatically select valve rectifiers instead of silicon diodes to further exaggerate the small amp vibe. There's a slave out and a series effects loop with variable send levels, and a very useful defeat switch that takes the loop out along with the front panel global master and solo controls. Some players like this dual master volume arrangement, others don't. Whilst giving you the option of making every sound switchable for rhythm and solo work, it lowers headroom and makes the amp harder to dial in, so it's nice to be able to take this feature out for a more direct path to the speakers, which are well catered for. You can also use a relay-friendly MIDI controller to switch channel and solo functions thanks to the handy remote jacks.

SOUNDS: As you'd expect given the EL34 valves, the Stiletto's sounds are inspired by British rock with a higher bass emphasis and a more defined up-front mid-range punch. Tite Clean is a crystal-clear rhythm sound with a fast attack and chopped low-end response that keeps the guitar clear of bass player territory. Fat Clean expands the lows for big, juicy ballad chords, while crunch is a taste of what the Stiletto is really all about: an aggressive, mean and biting distortion with a devastatingly fast response inspired by the classic Brit rock sound.

Moving on to channel two, there's a second helping of Crunch, then step up if you dare to Tite Gain, a killer lead sound that's perfect for evoking seventies solo excess, with a screaming treble that's

MESA ENGINEERING STILETTO DEUCE HEAD

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All valve two-channel Class AB head with switchable valve and solid state rectification

OUTPUT: 100W RMS

VALVES: Five ECC83/

12AX7 preamp, four EL34 power amp, two 5U4 rectifier

DIMENSIONS: 240 (h)

x 650 (w) x 245mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 19/40

CABINET: Birch ply

CHANNELS: Two

CONTROLS: Gain, bass, mid, treble, master volume, presence x2, global master and solo volume

FOOTSWITCH: Two-button footswitch changes channels, toggles solo function

ADDITIONAL FEATURES:

Three separate voice presets on both channels, series FX loop and slave out with level controls, separate half-power switches for both channels combined with rectifier tracking, bold/spongy switch, loop and solo/

master defeat switch, remote switching jacks for channel and solo functions

OPTIONS: Wide range of custom finishes available to order, see Mesa's website for details

RANGE OPTIONS: Stiletto Trident head 150 watts, 4

x 12 cabinets, 2 x 12 cabs

www.mesaaboogie.com

The rivals

- Marshall TSL
- 100 head
- Hughes & Kettner
- Triamp II
- Rivera Knucklehead
- Reverb head

Marshall's flagship is an old warhorse that's still very effective but it's beginning to show its age. Paul Rivera's Knucklehead is based on a design that's been refined for over 20 years to the point where it's nigh on perfect – you also get reverb and MIDI-driven channel switching. It's one of the few amps that can rival Boogie for build quality and it looks the part too. The Triamp is less well-known in the UK but packs serious punch and great styling – don't miss out on trying one, they're right up with the world's best in the tone department



Fluid Drive adds even more gain with a treacle-thick mid-range for a beautiful, almost limitless sustain – ideal for those Parisienne Walkway moments

→ bright but not painful and an amazing touch-sensitive response. Finally, Fluid Drive adds even more gain with a treacle-thick mid-range for a beautiful, almost limitless sustain – ideal for those Parisienne Walkway moments. The overdrive this voicing delivers with valve rectification switched in has to be heard to be believed, it's almost unreal compared to any other amp apart from a Rectifier.

Some mains hum creeps in at higher gain settings, but on all other voicings the Stiletto is virtually clear of noise and, for such a complex circuit, it's remarkably well-sorted. One prime objective was to make the Stiletto complement the Rectifier's sound and we think Mesa has totally succeeded. Both amps have similar high-frequency tonality, then the Stiletto fills the gap left by the Recto's usual mid-range scoop, while the bottom end is layered with the Recto excavating the basement and the Stiletto hammering the ground floor. Any two-guitar band that equips themselves with both amps is going to create a huge sound.

Verdict

With prices identical to the big Rectifier heads, the Stiletto Deuce and its 150-watt big brother (the almighty Stiletto Trident) aren't for the faint of heart or wallet, but when EL34 power and real tone are all that matters they're going to be very hard to beat. Yes, it's expensive – but for professional players and well-heeled amateurs who want the best, it



Both channels have three different voice presets that can be selected with these switches



The included footswitch allows you to change channel and toggle the solo function

doesn't have much competition.

Unbelievably it's been 15 years since the Rectifier first appeared, and it's too early to say whether the Stiletto will earn the same kind of reputation. The Rectifier amps – used by everyone from Foo Fighters to Limp Bizkit to Nickelback – have done much to define American guitar tone over recent years. It looks like there's another rock guitar explosion just around the corner, too, though with a more classic rock edge.

Many bands are now fusing the omnipresent grungier tones of the nineties with seventies-inspired guitar sounds and for that, the Stiletto has all the kick you need. All in all, it's another awesome weapon from the undisputed king of high-performance guitar amplification. Don't miss it. **G**

Mesa Engineering Stiletto Deuce head

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★



Mesa Boogie Stiletto \$4595 & \$5195

MESA BOOGIE STILETTO

PRICE: \$4595 (Deuce), \$5195 (Trident)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All-valve amplifier head

OUTPUT: 50/100W (Deuce), 50/150W (Trident)

VALVES: 2 x 5U4 rectifier tubes, 4 x EL34s (Deuce), 6 x EL34s (Trident)

DIMENSIONS: 250 x 250 x 640mm

WEIGHT: 23kg

CABINET: Baltic birch ply

CHANNELS: Two, with three modes each (fat clean, tite clean, crunch x 2, tite gain, fluid drive)

FOOTSWITCH: Channel one/two, solo boost

CONTROLS: Solo level, output level, master, presence, bass, mid, treble, gain, mode switch

ADDITIONAL

FEATURES: 5 Bold/spongy 'variac' switch, 0/100W (Deuce) or 50/150W (Trident) switch, FX loop

OPTIONS: Available in Zinc or Black Vinyl/Croco as standard. Custom finishes also available

Pro Audio Supplies (02) 6249 7766

www.mesaboogie.com

The new Stiletto from Mesa Boogie: it slices, it dices, and then it knocks you flat with its crystalline focus by Gun Arvidsson

The people at Mesa Boogie are justifiably excited about their new creation. Available in Deuce (100W) or Trident (150W) variants, the Stiletto was designed from the ground up to showcase the beauty of the EL34 valves at its heart. The amplifier delivers razor-sharp, silvery tones that can be as lethal as its namesake. Yet the careful reworking of the EQ controls, as well as a range of modes per channel give the classic Best of British sound a whole new range of very contemporary possibilities.

Despite their much sought-after assets, EL34 tubes nevertheless have some shortcomings which the folk at Mesa Boogie addressed in the development of the Stiletto. In the

words of Randall Smith, the founder of Mesa Boogie, "Those tubes are notoriously fragile." However, with some entrepreneurial voltage switching, their tendency to overheat when subjected to an extremely high signal load was subverted.

The amp is solidly constructed – the chassis is folded steel, seam-welded at the corners and chromed. The cabinet is made from 17.7mm seven-ply baltic birch, with tongue-and-groove joinery. There is plenty of ventilation around the tubes, and appearance wise, the unit is very attractive. Mirror-bright chrome panels and grilles are juxtaposed against the black faux crocodile face; the red jewel power indicator contrasts with the searing indigo of the clean-

MESA BOOGIE STILETTO TEST RESULTS

WE LIKED Vision and purpose make for an intense and dynamic amplifier. Hot styling and awesome sound shaping possibilities; very distinct personality

WE DISLIKED It's very difficult to dislike anything about this amp head

channel light. And lo, the glorious glow of those EL34s simmers in the background as if underlining the uppercute force of the beast.

The exquisite brightness and focus of the Stiletto's tubes can be appreciated through two fully independent channels. Their features are similar, but not identical: for example, there is a slower taper on channel two's presence pot to optimise its range when used with the 'tite gain' and 'fluid drive' settings. In simpler English, this means the 'crunch' mode common to both channels will sound distinctly different even when all the controls appear to be set to identical values.

Speaking of which, the control panel on this amplifier is readily intelligible and well set out. The signal path effectively moves from right to left, starting with the input and footswitch jacks, and onto the mode selection switches... but more about those later. Then onwards through gain, treble, middle, bass, presence and master controls. The pots are in series, so the gain and treble are really where the money's at – which says a lot about the way the circuitry has been prioritised.



The four-chamber heart of the Stiletto Deuce: a quartet of EL34 tubes



Another hint as to the way in which the machine is geared, lies in the voicings for the mid and bass tone controls. Compared to Rectifier heads, the bass control's frequency range peaks about an octave higher, while the mid control has been lowered by a similar amount. Although this strategy brings their ranges very close together, it also lets you sculpt exactly the right frequencies to squeeze the best from those EL34s.

The Stiletto was designed from the ground up to showcase the beauty of the EL34 valves at its heart, and delivers razor-sharp, silvery tones which can be as lethal as its namesake

Next we come to the power switching options, which allow you to engage either two or all four of the EL34s for 50W or 100W in the case of the Deuce. Or six tubes and 150W on the Trident. After the self-explanatory channel selector, output and solo boost, is a toggle marked bold/spongy. In the 'bold' setting, this supplies full voltage to the power stage, with obvious effects. 'Spongy', however, is how Mesa Boogie describes a variac-like cut in the AC power supply, which has a mild brown-out type effect on the incoming voltage – especially noticeable when the tubes are really pumping.

The output and solo controls on the front are actually wired as part of the FX loop on the rear panel – a paradigm which has been a design feature in

Mesa Boogie amps for years. This means that when you switch off the FX loop, you also lock out these two controls; personally I would have preferred an FX loop that doesn't affect these other elements. However, in all objectivity, the FX loop is so transparent that this wiring really does not work to the amp's detriment. As distinct from the FX loop, there is also a slave send jack. This lines out the full

sound of the amplifier, including the power stages. It is useful at larger venues or in conjunction with outboard rack systems which feed a separate series of power amps.

Also round the back there is the option to switch between tube and diode rectifier tracking. If methods for AC/DC conversion are a mystery to you, or perhaps evoke images of a religious fundamentalist harassing Angus Young, let's just say these switches give you yet another option in fine-tuning how the Stiletto feels to play through. The switches allow you to choose between a hard, unwavering power supply to the rest of the system (silicon), or a more elastic feel with a bit of compressed, Cadillac-like suspension.

SOUNDS: Once you've become familiar with the subtleties of different bold/spongy or tube/diode combinations, you are greeted with a breathtaking range of possibilities. With a bit of tweaking and playing it's a breeze to get exactly what you're after. If you're into space-cadet type layers of phaser, reverb and digital delay over the exquisite texture of this amplifier, then so be it. The FX loop dives right into the heart of the signal chain, lining out after the channel selector switch and before the power stages. Each channel has three modes to choose from: fat clean, tite clean and crunch on channel one, and crunch (the return!), tite gain and fluid drive on channel two.

The fat clean really is as big as a whale. A *killer* whale. There's nothing sluggish about it: in fact the bottom end is as bouncy and economic as the one on Cameron Diaz, and just as fun to spank. One presumes. Tite clean is drastically different: narrow and urgent, it is a clarion call of higher mids while the lower frequencies take a step back into the shadows. Still, there is nothing blaring or lurid in the mature and dignified shape of this mode.

The 'crunch' mode is less saturated than the two high-gain options on the lead channel, but it's well capable of a throaty growl, for example in response to a bit of high-octane humbucker action. It's the crossover point between the channels, but instead of simply duplicating the parameters, the



channel two version has a slightly higher-gain entry point, providing a smooth step up into the Stiletto's more fiery territory.

The sheer resolution of this amp is just goddamn incredible. There isn't the slightest hint of muddiness to be found anywhere, and especially on the 'tite' settings, you will never fight to be heard over the other guitarist again. In fact, central to the Stiletto's design philosophy was the mission to create an amp that would complement a Dual or Triple Rectifier on the same stage rather than compete with it. And vice versa.

Having said that, we didn't actually set up a duel between the Stiletto (atop a Mesa Boogie cab, naturally) and any other stack, but it wasn't hard to extrapolate what it would sound like. In the 'work smarter not harder' philosophy, the Stiletto's frequency package would step adroitly to the front of the mix – but without the excessive volume boost needed to actually blot out everything else.

If that simply isn't enough to explain your credit card statement to your significant other, you've got a beastly little secret weapon: the Solo control.



Gleaming chrome, faux crocodile skin... you can tell it's hand-built in California



Used in conjunction with the supplied footswitch, you can boost the output volume of the power stage by a pre-determined amount. At close range, this can drown out any argument. Onstage, which is where a responsible musician is more likely to use it, the switch provides you with just a slight leg-up over the rest of the band. Don't worry, the sound guy will get used to it.

With circuitry built to accommodate the idiosyncracies of the EL34s, you can afford to let them shine by running them pretty hot. The manual goes to great pains to remind us the controls should be used judiciously, and the best quality is achieved around the middle of the road. Having said that, reverse psychology aside, I had to just max it out for a second, you know, judiciously like. The stack roared like Satan's personal practice amp, and I was extremely impressed by how sensitive it still was to pick attack despite the jump in compression.

The 'fluid drive' mode is remarkably responsive, even when you crank the controls to howling, ludicrous levels. Which I only did for a period of judicious brevity, I swear. Generally speaking, we found that individual

notes retain plenty of shape and have more body than BB King. A bit of careful fiddling with the treble and gain controls will give your solos that magic envelope finish with just a bit of fur around the edges but also a dangerous snarl when you want it.

Verdict

A stellar amplifier head, very rewarding to play through. The hand-built structure is uncompromising in terms of strength, looks and quality. It's easy to see why Mesa Boogie was so determined to build an amp more or less exclusively to highlight the EL34 tubes: every note sings with a spectrum of gently encouraged harmonics, while the various modes cover just about all the bases. And [ahem] trebles.

Compared to the Rectifier amps, the slightly raised bass control and lowered mid control are optimised to shape everything left after the gain and treble pots have had their way – a strategy that speaks volumes about how this machine carries its weight. It is a fast, sinewy amp with a generous character yet uncompromising response – and of course, an indomitable edge. **A**

CUSTOM AMPLIFIERS HANDBUILT IN THE USA



SAMPLE SETTINGS
for Your Audition

Before You Start - Please Set Up Rear Controls:



Channel 1 - Clean: S = Single Coil, H = Humbucker



Channel 1 - Crunch: S = Single Coil, H = Humbucker



Channel 2 - Tite Gain Solo: S = Single Coil, H = Humbucker



Channel 2 - Fluid Drive Solo: S = Single Coil, H = Humbucker

