

SOUNDCHECK

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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-octave 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's 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

