



## Mesa/Boogie Stiletto Ace



### FEATURES

50 watts of EL34 tube **power**

One Celestion V-30 12" **speaker** (also available in 2x12 and head-only configurations)

Front panel features two **channels**, each with three modes

Back panel provides a series effects loop, level-adjustable line out, and multiple speaker **outputs**

Available in Emerald Bronco/Tan or Black Taurus/Black **colors**

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### ON THE CD



By Douglas Baldwin

**L**ike the great artists they support, great manufacturers are capable of finding new media to explore, reinventing themselves again and again without losing their signature touch. Mesa/Boogie has done precisely this with the Stiletto Ace, junior partner in their Stiletto line. Powered with the unique muscle of EL34 power tubes, traditionally associated with British amplification, the Ace not only delivers a virtual history lesson in Anglo aggression, but expands into some delightful new territory as well.

**LOOKS** The Stiletto Ace offers two channels, each with controls for gain, treble, mid, bass, presence, and master volume. Each channel has three toggle-selectable modes: Channel 1

focuses on clean settings with Tite Clean, Fat Clean, and Crunch modes, while Channel 2 begins with Crunch before moving to the hotter Tite Gain and Fluid Drive modes. You can also regulate each channel's power response independently by selecting either a silicon diode for a tighter feel or a tube rectifier for a more compressed feel. Global controls include Output, Solo Boost, and Bold (117V) or Spongy (90V) power settings. A front-panel jack accepts Mesa's footswitch for channel-switching and solo mode activation. Overall, it's an easy-to-use layout; our only concern was with the between-knob graphics that can't be seen from above.

Rear panel features include a series effects loop with a hard bypass switch, separate jacks for channel-switch-

ing and solo mode, speaker outputs and a slave output with level control. The combo's closed back is a clever alternative to the usual open-backed design, adding to the low-end articulation without compromising airflow around the electronics. Tube access is tight but feasible, although you'll need to find another niche to stash the footswitch.

Our review model's stock cosmetics—gold aluminum front panel, Emerald Bronco vinyl, tan leather highlights, and tan jute grille—are a refreshing alternative to standard amp dress. (A black-on-black motif is also standard, and a dizzying array of custom options is available.) The sturdy aluminum chassis and additional wood used in the closed back add some heft to the Stiletto; at over 80 lbs., this is *not* a taxi-and-subway amp.

**SOUND** Set either channel to Crunch mode and the Stiletto Ace will handily recreate the subtle-to-aggressive grind of classic British EL34 circuits. Frankly, Mesa could have stopped here and they'd have nailed a truly historic tone, which recalls both Ziggy-era Mick Ronson and Duane and Dickey at the Fillmore: a tight yet blooming bottom, gnarly and complex mids, and an aggressive high end with both slap and sizzle.

But the Stiletto Ace's other modes reveal a versatility that will astonish even the most jaded sound hounds. Channel 1's exploration of cleanliness reveals the "secret sounds"



Each channel can be voiced for a broad range of responses, often going far beyond "traditional British tone."

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# GEAR BOX

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many EL34 fans overlook. In Fat Clean mode, the amp becomes remarkably Strat-friendly with a wide, clean bass response, upper mid complexity, and clear highs—perfect for trio gigs. Flipping to Tite Clean mode rolls back the lows for a more focused mid-to-high voice that snaps, crackles, and pops in the pocket like Steve Cropper backing the Stax horns. Dime the gain, engage the Spongy Power and Tube Rectifier settings, and you'll swear this British-biased box was covered in California tweed.

At the other end of the spectrum, Channel

2 nails the modern side of EL34 tone. In Tite Gain mode, you'll want to scoop the mids and play every riff off *Master of Puppets*. Fluid Drive mode points the Stiletto toward Recto territory, adding enough volcanic gain to make legato leads practically play themselves, yet providing enough flexibility with the tone and power settings to sculpt aggressive rhythm sounds from the same crackling lava.

The enclosed speaker cabinet makes this 1×12 combo kick like a 4×12.

**IS IT FOR YOU?** Once again, Mesa/Boogie has managed to reinvent an entire category



of amplifier, putting a huge tonal range into a single combo amp while maintaining a distinctly Boogie-centric attitude. For arena-sized venues, consider the 100-watt Stiletto Deuce or—*gasp!*—150-watt Trident, but for premium gigging chores and mind-blowing studio versatility, the Stiletto Ace is the card to play.

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## Ace, Deuce, or Trident?

In Mesa's Stiletto line, the primary difference between the Ace, Deuce, and Trident is in the power output. With two EL34 tubes, the Ace puts out 50 watts, while the Deuce's quartet of EL34s can pump out 100 watts and the Trident's six-pack delivers a wall-popping 150 watts. But since both the Deuce and Trident have switchable power configurations that drop their output to 50 watts, I asked Doug West (R&D, Mesa Engineering) how the Ace justifies its place in the line.

"In the world of EL34 tone, 50-watt heads have always been a secret treasure," Doug explained. "They're tighter, crisper, and the highs seem to respond quicker. It's got a lot to do with the 50-watt transformer being smaller—it lets those high-end harmonics fly through faster. And the 50-watt configuration is more conducive to a combo format. Our next challenge was to create that closed-back 4×12 thump within a combo, and we believe we've found the best of both worlds with the Ace's closed-back cabinet and our custom-built Celestion V-30 speakers."

That belief was reinforced when, for comparison's sake, we ran the Ace through an open-backed Carvin Legacy cabinet. While not at all disappointing, the response was clearly a card of a different suit. It worked well in a small room, sounding more "in tune" with the space, but the low midrange was a bit smeared and the kick-in-the-guts bottom was diminished. Since the Ace is available as a stand-alone head as well as a 1×12 and 2×12 combo, consider your gig, your budget, and your back while contemplating speaker and power options.