

Bragging Rights

Mesa/Boogie Dual Rectifier Road King head and 2x12 Recto cabinet. **BY ERIC KIRKLAND**

The multichannel boutique amps and innovative tone-shaping circuits created by Mesa/Boogie founder Randall Smith have shaped our expectations of how a guitar amp should perform. But nothing Smith has done could have prepared me for the new Mesa/Boogie Dual Rectifier Road King head. Boasting four channels, 12 preamp modes, and controls that govern each channel's power tubes, rectifier type, loop activation and cabinet selection, the "NOS-injected" Mesa/Boogie Road King head effectively gives guitarists a clear path to their ultimate tone.

Under the Hood

My test rig included a Road King head and a 2x12 closed-back Recto cab loaded with Vintage 30s. Both were covered in tough Black Taurus vinyl and featured leather corners.

The Road King appears to have a valve for every job: the head boasts four 6L6, two EL34, two 5U4 and five 12AX7 tubes. Mesa's Progressive Linkage power section allows you to use the four 6L6 and two EL34 tubes in five combinations, for power ratings of 50, 100 or 120 watts. Each combination can be used together with any of the amp's four channels to produce authentic reproductions of the circuits found in classic amplifiers.

Each of the Road King's four channels has independent controls for master, presence, bass, mid, treble and gain, all of which are arranged in neat rows of chrome knurled knobs. Next to each row is a three-position mini toggle that allows you to select among three modes. Channel one offers a choice of clean, fat or tweed settings; channel two lets you select from among clean, fat and Brit modes; and channels three and four have options for raw, and vintage and modern high gain.

The active-channel and effect-loop status are indicated by bright, multicolor LEDs in the center of the control panel, and a second LED display on the panel's left side specifies the active rectifiers and power tubes. As a final measure of control, the output dial lets you set the amp's overall level, which can be boosted by engaging the solo feature via the Kontroller footswitch (included). The front panel is rounded out with heavy-duty power and standby switches and a single input.

It's on the Road King's awe-inspiring back panel that the magic begins. Here, a phenomenal 16 knobs, 19 switches and 21 1/4-inch jacks cover every inch of space.

Starting from the panel's left side, there is a slave output with a level control, reverb controls for each channel and six speaker output jacks that can simultaneously manage multiple cabinets with different ohm ratings. There is also a pentode/triode switch, which is effective only on the EL34 tubes.

Next are the channel management controls. Grouped into individual clusters for each channel, they allow you to preselect the number and type of power tubes, the active speaker banks, tube or solid-state rectification, the active effect loop (1/series or 2/parallel) and loop 2's mix level. Once you've set up the controls for each channel, the Road King will activate them whenever you select a channel with the footswitch or back panel manual channel selection knob. Unbelievable!

The head's backside also holds the external trigger inputs, effect loop jacks, loop mix/level controls and external switching jacks for several features. Of special note is a powerful mini toggle that activates or bypasses the head's effect loop system. When bypassed, the Road King's front panel output and solo controls are disengaged and the individual preamp masters become the final volume controls. I preferred



END OF THE ROAD: The King's back panel

this set up for times when I wanted the most immediate response and open tone.

Other features on the back panel include the manual channel-selection knob, the eight-pin jack for the Kontroller and a switch for spongy or bold power voltages. The Road King's numerous back panel controls are augmented on the Kontroller, which has switches for each channel and loop, as well as for reverb, the solo boost and an external trigger.



ROYAL FAMILY: Road King head, 2x12 cab and Kontroller

List Prices

Road King head, \$2,499.00; Road King 2x12 combo, \$2,699.00; 2x12 Recto cabinet, \$499.00

Manufacturer

Mesa/Boogie, 1317 Ross St., Petaluma, CA 94954; (707) 778-6565; mesa-boogie.com

On the Track

With channel 1 set for two 6L6s and silicon diode rectification, I achieved sparkling clean sounds that were focused and fast, with superb clarity. This is the clean channel I've always wanted in a Boogie. Switching to the fat mode increased the torque for chunky low-end girth that kicked like an angry mule. With channel 2 set for a pair of EL34s, the Road King delivered dark splendor and blues-breaker sting.

Channels 3 and 4 covered a huge range of traditional and contemporary gain tones, from harmonic Plexi crunch to wild MKII distortion. Of course, if the famous Recto insanity is what you're after, then light up all the Mesa's tubes in channel 4's modern mode, and hold on. This improved and supercharged tone redefines the industry standard for ear-bleeding modern aggression. Furthermore, throughout my test, the Road King seemed absolutely married to the deep Vintage 30-loaded cab, cranking out complexity and projection without fatiguing my ears.

THE BOTTOM LINE

I've owned or played every Mesa/Boogie production amp to date, and the Road King eclipses them all. It has a ridiculously good clean channel and an indescribable range of gain and tone options, plus its fine-tuned circuits and progressive-linkage power section are the best Mesa has ever produced. Despite its plethora of features, the Road King is simple and intuitive to operate. Boasting boutique tone and the most versatility ever offered in a tube amp, the Road King blows the doors off the competition. **EW**