5 Tube Combo Amps

LONG FAVORRED BY STUDIO PLAYERS and on-the-go working musicians, small combo amps are seeing ever more use these days by guitarists who have found that 15 or 20 watts of tube power driving a 10" or 12" speaker can provide all the soulful SPL needed for a variety of gigs. An obvious advantage of low-watt amps is they can be cranked to levels that deliver a rush of overdriven-tube harmonics without blowing out the room or driving the soundman nuts. That said, improvements in design, speakers, and other circuit components have increased the punch and aggression of many of today’s small combos to the point where they warrant the same kind of volume-reducing features (pentode/triode switches, wattage controls, built-in power attenuators, etc.) typically seen on bigger amps.

If you’re shopping for a new low-watt combo amp you’ve undoubtedly seen how extreme the choices can be, with expensive hand-wired jobs with two knobs competing alongside more affordable models with enough switches and dials to make a 747 pilot feel at ease. Does a new amp that’s based on, say, a tweed Deluxe, really need anything more than Fender equipped it with in 1955? In many circumstances probably not, and a few celebrated boutique makers have proven this by recreating iconic amps practically verbatim. But unless you’ve chosen to martyr yourself by carrying nothing more than a guitar, amp, and directions to the gig, having a few extra features built into your amp can be a great thing. After all, why carry pedals for distortion, reverb, tremolo, and EQ if you don’t need to—especially if you’re just heading out for a rehearsal?

This roundup of five recently introduced tube combos—the Carr Sportsman, Goodsell Dominatrix 18, Fender EC Tremolux, Vox AC15C2 Twin, and the VHT Special 12/20RT—is representative of the diversity that exists in today’s amp market. Though all are powered by either 6V6 or EL84 tubes (the VHT can digest 6L6s and EL34s as well) and push between 12 and 20 watts into a 12" speaker (two in Vox’s case), their features and the way those functions are implemented make them different as night and day.

We tested these amps with a variety of guitars that included Fender Strats, Teles, and a Blacktop Jazzmaster, Fernandes S and T models, a Fano Stratosphere, a Gibson Les Paul, a G&L Korina ASAT Junior II, and a PRS SC58.

—ART THOMPSON
Carr Sportsman

TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS

SOME AMP MANUFACTURERS believe the more bells and whistles the better. When all those switches and knobs offer real-world tone shaping, this is a plus. Yet too often they deliver ultra-subtle changes that are hard to discern over pounding drums and washes of keys, while complicating operation and adding tone-suckling circuitry to the signal path. Steve Carr is no stranger to making amps with the occasional extra switch or knob, but his specialty is combos that deliver classic tones with a minimum of fuss.

The Sportsman’s 6V6 power stage and brown Tolex covering echo the vintage vibe of an old Fender Princeton or Deluxe, while the white control panel features pointer-style Volume, Treble, Mid, Bass, and Reverb controls, along with a Max knob for the “headroom attenuator.” The on/off switch offers a choice of polarity once the standby switch is engaged.

All Carr amps feature point-to-point construction and premium-grade components, and the Sportsman adds adhesive foam to protect the MOD reverb tank (and damp unwanted resonance), and a strain relief on the hospital ICU-grade power cord to prevent you from losing or forgetting it. A heavy-duty TMI transformer, 120-watt 12″ Eminence Patriot Red White & Blues speaker, and a handcrafted-in-house, yellow pine cabinet with glued dovetail joints, combine to make a hefty 42-pound rig.

Tested with a humbucker-equipped Fender Blacktop Jazzmaster, and Fernandes S- and T-type guitars, the Carr delivered a lot of headroom for a 19-watt amp, and sounded very Fender-like with the Mid knob rolled back. This also increased the headroom, staving off any kind of breakup until almost two o’clock on the Volume—even with humbuckers! With the Mids cranked, the Sportsman started to bark as early as nine o’clock, making the Mid knob a de facto drive control.

This was all with the headroom attenuator’s Max knob, well, maxed. This is not a master volume—the overdriven sound with the Volume at nine cleaned up completely as I lowered the Max knob. But by turning the Volume back up I was able to match the former tone almost exactly, just at a lower volume. At its lowest settings, with the Volume full up, the Max knob produced rich crunch tones at bedroom volumes without a hint of fizzle. But the true glory of the Sportsman appeared with both Max and Volume up all the way, which yielded the kind of harmonically complex, “edge of feedback on any note” tone I’ve heard on amps costing up to a grand more. Did I mention the Sportsman loves pedals? In clean or dirty settings, it let the quirky character of my boutique stompsboxes shine through with amazing clarity.

Gain aficionados and those who like amps with an airplane cockpit’s worth of knobs and switches will find plenty meeting their specs elsewhere. However, if you love small American combos but wish for more headroom, reliability, and tone options, you are the target market for the Carr Sportsman.
**SPECIFICATIONS**

## CARR SPORTSMAN

**CONTACT**  
Carr Amplifiers, (919) 545-0747; carramps.com

**PRICE**  
$2,190 1x12, $2,090 1x10, $2,010 head, retail

**CHANNELS**  
One

**CONTROLS**  
Volume, Treble, Mid, Bass, Reverb, Headroom

**POWER**  
16 watts clean, 19 watts maxed

**TUBES**  
Two 12AX7 and two 12AT7 preamp tubes, two 6V6 output tubes

**EXTRAS**  
Variable Headroom control, Reverb

**SPEAKERS**  
One 12" Eminence Patriot Red White & Blue

**WEIGHT**  
42 lbs

**BUILT**  
USA

**KUDOS**  
Warm, complex, American tone with a surprising amount of headroom for a small amp.

**CONCERNS**  
None.

## FENDER EC TREMOLUX

**CONTACT**  
Fender Musical Instruments, (480) 596-9690; fender.com

**PRICE**  
$2,799 retail/$1,999 street

**CHANNELS**  
One

**CONTROLS**  
Volume, Tone, Tremolo Speed, Output (high/low)

**POWER**  
12 watts

**TUBES**  
Three Groove Tubes 12AX7A preamp tubes, two Electro-Harmonix 6V6GT output tubes, Ruby 5Y3GT rectifier

**EXTRAS**  
Onboard power attenuator, Tremolo footswitch

**SPEAKERS**  
One 12" Celestion Heritage G12-65 (8Ω)

**WEIGHT**  
25 lbs

**BUILT**  
USA

**KUDOS**  
Nails the '50s Fender “tweed” tone with stellar tremolo and a useful attenuator.

**CONCERNS**  
Best paired with brighter guitars. Expensive.

## GOODSELL DOMINATRIX 18

**CONTACT**  
Goodsell Electric Instruments, (678) 488-8176; superseventeen.com

**PRICE**  
$1,449 street

**CHANNELS**  
One

**CONTROLS**  
Volume, Treble, Mid, Bass, Reverb, Master

**POWER**  
18 watts

**TUBES**  
Four 12AX7 preamp tubes, two EL84 output tubes, 5Y3 rectifier

**EXTRAS**  
Custom colors available for a $400 upcharge.

**SPEAKERS**  
One 12" WGS ET-65

**WEIGHT**  
31 lbs

**BUILT**  
Circuit handwired in USA, cabinet built in China

**KUDOS**  
Wide range of clean sparkly tones and edgy British grind.

**CONCERNS**  
Can be a little too bright with single-coils.

## VHT SPECIAL 12/20RT COMBO

**CONTACT**  
VHT Amplification; vhtamp.com

**PRICE**  
$749 street

**CHANNELS**  
One

**CONTROLS**  
Volume (pull for boost), Tone, Reverb (pull for deep), Speed, Slow/Fast switch, Tremolo, 6-position Depth switch, 3-position Texture switch, Watts control, Voltage Range switch (high/low), Pentode/Triode select on Standby switch

**POWER**  
12 watts with 6V6 tubes. 20 watts with optional 6L6 or EL34 tubes

**TUBES**  
Four 12AX7 preamp tubes, 6V6 reverb/tremolo drive tube, two 6V6 output tubes

**EXTRAS**  
Tube buffered effects loop w/send and return level controls. Tube driven reverb and tremolo. Dual external speaker outs w/impedance selector (4/8/16Ω), Voltage selector (100/120/230v). Built-in 9V DC power supply for pedals (cables included). Footswitches included (single-button for boost, two-button for reverb and tremolo).

**SPEAKER**  
VHT ChromeBack 12

**WEIGHT**  
42.5 lbs

**BUILT**  
China

**KUDOS**  
Cool distortion tones. Herculean reverb. Lots of useful features.

**CONCERNS**  
Limited clean headroom, especially with humbuckers.

## VOX AC15C2 TWIN

**CONTACT**  
Vox Amplification, (631) 390-6500; voxamps.com

**PRICE**  
$1,100 retail/$799 street

**CHANNELS**  
Two, with individual inputs

**CONTROLS**  
Top Boost channel: Bass, Treble, Volume. Normal channel: Volume, Shared Master Volume and Tone Cut, Reverb, Tremolo Depth and Speed

**POWER**  
15 watts

**TUBES**  
Three 12AX7 preamp tubes, two EL84 output tubes

**EXTRAS**  
Dual external speaker jacks with 8/16Ω impedance switch. Footswitchable reverb/tremolo (footswitch not included, $39 street)

**SPEAKERS**  
Two 12" Celestion G12M Greenback

**WEIGHT**  
67 lbs

**BUILT**  
China

**KUDOS**  
Wide range of classic Vox tones at medium-to-small club volumes. Great value.

**CONCERNS**  
Heavy. No channel switching.