

Vintage 47's VA-185G Amplifier

Reviving the Charlie Christian Soul

When guitarists talk about vintage amps, they tend to focus on the classic Fender, Marshall and Vox designs of the '60s and '70s. But manufacturers were producing amps as far back as the 1930s, and to many, these designs are among the finest ever made. One aficionado of the early models is Steve Woolley of Vintage 47, who specializes in hand-building amps based on pre-1960s circuitry. His VA-185G pays tribute to the Gibson EH-185, which, along with its younger brother the EH-150, defined the sound of electric jazz guitar in the '30s and '40s with players like Charlie Christian, Oscar Moore and Django Reinhardt.

Vintage 47 builds amplifiers based on early tube designs from manufacturers like Valco, Rickenbacker and Gibson. Instead of typical nine-pin vacuum tubes like the 12AX7, these early amps utilized nine-pin Octal tubes in the preamp. According to Woolley, the Octal tube is significantly larger than the 12AX7 and produces a warmer, thicker tone. Another important feature of these amps is that they are relatively low-wattage devices (5–20 watts), a significant factor in their overall tonal color.

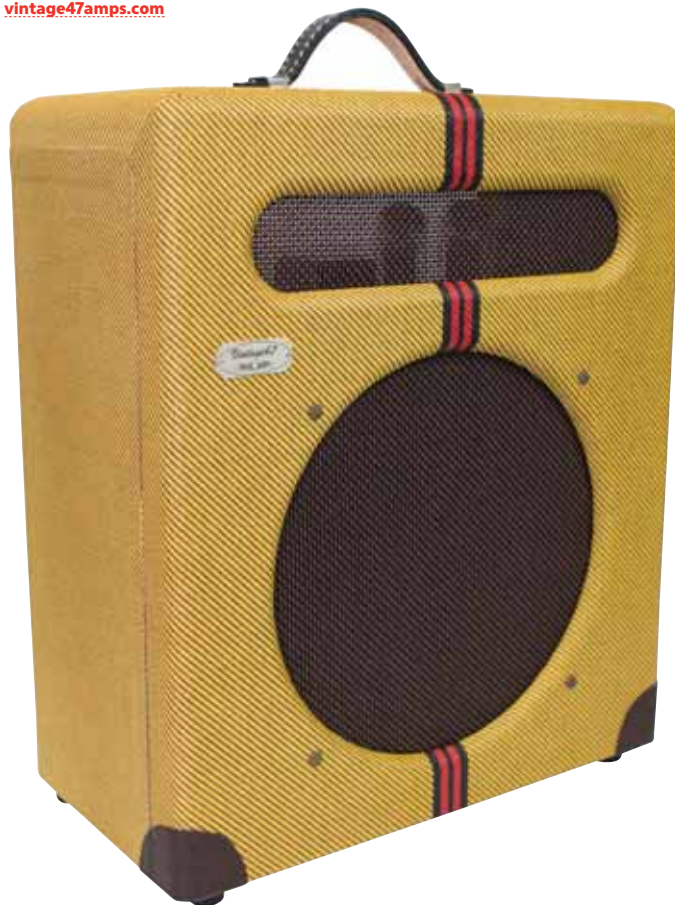
The VA-185G offers increased headroom compared to many of the company's other models, which makes it a good choice for jazz players who desire a smooth, clean sound. The back of the amp shows off its clean and simple layout with only a power switch, basic volume and tone control plus three inputs: two labeled "instrument" and one labeled "microphone." The semi-open back also allows for a clear view of the tube complement, which features a GZ34 rectifier, 6SN7 inverter, two 6L6GT power tubes and a 6SQ7 NOS (new old stock) metal jacketed Octal tube for the preamp. The VA-185 is available direct from Vintage 47 for \$995.

Playing through the VA-185G is a unique experience. Housing a 12-inch speaker pushing only 15 watts, the Octal circuitry produces a color and response that's all its own. For those of us who appreciate early jazz guitar sounds and lust after that horn-like tone that Christian popularized, this amp is beyond cool. It's interesting how with such a basic set of controls, this amp is capable of a surprisingly wide variety of sounds. The VA-185G is very sensitive to the output level of your pickups, and adjusting your guitar's volume knob results in a range of options, from clean to a bit dirty. My favorite tone was with the amp turned about three-fourths of the way up and my guitar turned down to about half. Each of the three inputs is voiced differently as well, presenting even more options.

Guitar amps like the original Gibson EH-185 are of a special breed, and they appeal to players who can truly appreciate their particular characteristics. If you are one of those select few on the quest for that unique sound and the cost of an original EH-185 is out of your price range, the VA-185G may just be your Holy Grail amplifier.

—Keith Baumann

vintage47amps.com



Santa Cruz Guitar Co. FS Model

Fingerstyle Versatility, First-Rate Sound

The Santa Cruz Guitar Co. has been making boutique acoustic guitars since 1976, building instruments for heavy hitters like Tony Rice and Eric Clapton. The company's FS model is designed mainly for fingerstyle playing, as the original impetus for its creation was the proliferation of contemporary acoustic players who were using alternate tunings and needed a less "boomy" guitar. A team of Santa Cruz luthiers (Jeff Traugott, Michael Hornick and Steve Palazzo) conceptualized a guitar that would, according to the company, "respond with immediacy and volume from the minimized energy imparted from the fingertips and the reduced tension of many open tunings." Starting with the wood—it features an Indian rosewood body and a cedar top—the FS is well on its way to achiev-

ing this goal. Also, for facilitating fingerpicking, it features a wider neck.

Picking the FS up out of the case, I was struck by how light and sleek it is. Yet when I strummed a simple D or G chord, I was surprised at the volume and power that came from this almost delicate-feeling instrument. To test the fingerpicking aspects of the guitar, I decided on David Crosby's Emin11 tuning (E–B–D–G–A–D) and began playing his folk hit "Guinnevere." Even while using the flesh of my fingers only, I noticed immediately I didn't have to play very hard to get a fairly big sound. The minor 9 chords and beautiful dissonances of that guitar part really shimmered. I also did some hybrid picking in open-D tuning and D–A–D–G–A–D, and the bass notes combined with banjo-type rolls all spoke evenly.