

Barnett Davies 15/30 Valve guitar combo

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In a world of Western-designed, Chinese-manufactured amps, Performing Musician takes a look at this rather tasty all-valve boutique guitar combo from small Sussex-based manufacturer, Barnett Davies.

by Bob Thomas

Reviewing equipment is a somewhat strangely solitary task. Week in, week out, parcels of various shapes and sizes filled to bursting point with new and wondrous products turn up, each and every one of which is designed to make making music a better and a more uplifting experience. Very, very occasionally a PR person or a rep from the manufacturer or distributor will deliver an item to me, but it is only once in a very blue moon that a product's entire design, manufacturing, distribution and sales team arrive on my doorstep to not only deliver it, but also to tell me something about it.

However, one sunny day a few weeks ago, that's exactly what happened when Dave Barnett and Clive Davies travelled up from their base in St Leonards-on-Sea carrying the combo guitar amplifier that bears their names. The pair marry a passion for valve amplification with many years of experience in repairing and restoring them, and their hard-won experience and knowledge is more than evident in the Barnett Davies 15/30 amplifier.

Dave started out by converting radios and radiograms into guitar amps and then moved on to building valve guitar amps for his own band. After a successful career in electronics in both aerospace and the Post Office, Dave eventually became a partner in a music retail business and has, since then, worked solely with musical instrument electronics and studio equipment.

Clive travelled a slightly more circuitous career path, one that took in the family laundry and dry cleaning businesses, followed by a career in dispensing optics before his passion for collecting, repairing and restoring valve amplifiers took over, and led him into collaborating with Dave on the design, development and production of the Barnett Davies 15/30 combo amplifier.

The design philosophy of the 15/30 begins from the premise that a guitar amp has to be carried in and out of the gig. As every guitarist knows, valve amplifiers can be horrendously heavy and anything that can be done to reduce weight without affecting sound quality has to be a good thing. Unlike the vast majority of valve amp manufacturers, Barnett Davies set out to build a professional-level valve amplifier for the gigging guitarist that could be easily carried in and out of a venue in one hand — with a guitar in the other!

Construction

The Barnett Davies 15/30 combo comes complete with its own custom, heavy duty padded cover in fetching dark blue. The cabinet, which is as small as they could possibly make it, isn't all that much bigger than a 1 x 12 extension cab, has a recess in the top edge to improve access to the control panel and is made from solid, comb-jointed pine with a ply baffle. The Tolex covering on the review model is a fashionably familiar dark red colour. There is a wide range of alternative colours available and Dave and Clive will try to accommodate any more exotic finish requests. Chrome corner protectors ensure that more damage will be done to the colliding object than to the amplifier, the large leather handle is extremely comfortable and the chromed control panel and the black grille with its black and silver Barnett Davies logo completes a classy-looking package.

The chassis of the 15/30 is made from welded aluminium, and while that isn't the cheapest of options, it doesn't require painting or plating and offers lower weight and better electrical conductivity and screening than mere steel. The chassis' box-like design, with the top and front panel in one piece that hinges at the front to form a lid, improves screening and makes access for any necessary maintenance an absolute doddle. This simple feature serves to illustrate the amount of practical experience lying at the heart of this amplifier's design.

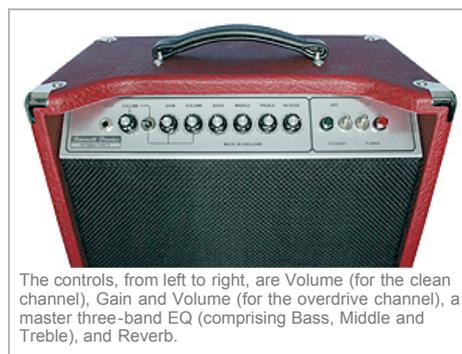
The front panel slopes at 45 degrees, making it easy for you to see the amplifier's controls no matter whether the amplifier is on the floor or on a beer crate. This is one of the little touches that makes the 15/30 such an easy amp to gig with.

The speaker is a 12-inch Celestion Alnico Gold as opposed to the now-discontinued Celestion Century that was fitted to early production models. Alnico speakers are known for a slightly softer attack, a warm bottom end and sweet highs — qualities that make them the first choice of many discerning tone hounds, myself included — and, to my ears, this speaker perfectly complements the 15/30.

Features

The Barnett Davies 15/30 combo features two entirely separate preamp channels — one clean, one with a gain/master volume setup — that feed a common set of tone controls and a spring reverb. As these two channels are separate, they can be combined to produce a third sound. The amplifier's output level is switchable between 30 and 15 Watts, all four of its EL84 output valves being used in the 30-Watt mode, and only two in 15-Watt operation.

Channel and reverb switching in the 15/30 is done through a simple, silent earth topology, which means that you don't get any pops and bangs in operation. The reverb switching deserves special mention, as the Reverb On/Off switch is in the footswitch, and an associated preset pot allows you to set a reverb level independent of the front panel control when in the Off mode, so that you can actually have two different, footswitchable reverb levels available.



The controls, from left to right, are Volume (for the clean channel), Gain and Volume (for the overdrive channel), a master three-band EQ (comprising Bass, Middle and Treble), and Reverb.

Barnett Davies 15/30
£1595

A British Morgan in a world of exotic Lamborghinis and Ferraris, this cleverly conceived, beautifully hand-built, boutique and British valve guitar amplifier combo deserves to be on the shopping list of every well-heeled gigging guitarist. Its functionality, portability, ease of use, great sound and little touches of practical originality place the Barnett Davies 15/30 firmly on a par with the best valve guitar combos from any manufacturer, boutique or otherwise. If you're looking for a guitar amplifier at around this price point, you really need to check out a 15/30. I know that I want one!

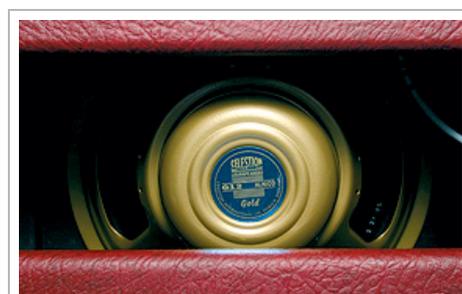
information

Barnett Davies
+44 (0)1424 855184
www.barnettdavies.com

Tech Spec

15/30

- Class-A/B combo amplifier.
- Hand built, point-to-point wiring.
- All-valve circuitry.
- Power: 15 Watts or 30 Watts (switchable).
- Two separate preamp channels with individual volume controls (can be combined to give 'third' channel).
- Valve spring reverb.
- Three-band EQ (Bass, Middle, Treble).
- Single 12-inch Celestion Alnico Gold loudspeaker.
- Balanced, speaker-simulated XLR DI out.
- Dimensions (WDH): 428 x 254 x 432mm.
- Weight: 13.2 kg.



Additionally, the 15/30 has a couple of features that add to its gigging functionality and also make it an ideal home studio companion. Firstly, it has an inbuilt dummy load so that you can run it safely without having a loudspeaker attached — which means that you won't annoy your neighbours at three in the morning. So that you can get something out of it in this mode, the 15/30 has a balanced XLR DI output with frequency-compensating voicing circuitry to simulate a loudspeaker, which you can then run into a mixer or recorder in your home studio or on stage as the preamp for a larger rig. Uniquely, in my experience, this DI output is driven from a separate tap on the output transformer, which means that the designers don't have to deal with the vagaries of the transformer/speaker interface, giving them a somewhat easier starting point. On stage or in the studio, you could also run the DI at the same time as feeding the 15/30 into a speaker (internal or otherwise) and use it to feed a separately amplified effects setup. I tried that setup with my TC Electronics G-Force feeding a pair of powered JBL EON 10s and that setup produced some stunning results.

The 15/30 is fitted with a 12-inch Celestion Alnico Gold loudspeaker.

The front panel control layout is simple, uncluttered and intuitive in operation. Starting on the extreme left, the solitary jack input is followed by the clean preamp channel Volume control. Next to that sits the three-way (Clean/Combine/Overdrive) channel select switch, which has to be in the Combine position when using the footswitch. This is followed by the Gain and Volume controls for the overdrive preamp channel. The three-band passive and interactive tone controls follow — Bass, Middle, Treble — and the final control takes care of the amount of reverb in your sound. The front panel is completed by the Standby and Power switches with their associated indicator LEDs.

The back panel is a pretty Spartan affair with only a mains fuse, speaker jack, the 15/30-Watts toggle switch and the XLR balanced DI socket with its level control to keep it company.

In use

The 15/30 is not only very light, but that weight is also perfectly balanced and it is the only 30-Watt valve guitar combo that I've ever carried one-handed up a couple of flights of stairs at the same time as a guitar case and a leads bag — now that's what I call a killer feature!

Sound-wise, the 15/30 is that rare beast: a dynamic, extremely articulate, relatively transparent and neutral sounding amplifier that doesn't impose its own particular character on the sound of your guitar, and I love this state of affairs. In my own electric guitar playing I've always tended to gravitate towards the older Fender amplifiers, because I'm looking for the clarity and articulation that you get out of a good one even when you've got the wick well wound up. But, love them as I do, I know that they have their limitations and I've got a good few pedals that I draw on to get more 'modern' preamp-based distortion sounds when I need them.

The Clean channel of the Barnett Davies 15/30 has all the clarity and articulation that you could possibly want, and the sound thickens up beautifully as you push the Volume control round the dial. The Overdrive channel can be set up as a second clean channel with as much thickening and break-up as you want, or can be turned into a heavily distorted monster, but still keeping articulation and the sound of your guitar completely in there. Whether I used my Strat, Tele or Les Paul Deluxe, I always felt that I was hearing the sound of the guitar and not just a bunch of distorting valves.

However, the Combine mode was where I found my sound on the 15/30. With the Clean channel turned up enough to give me only a touch of thickening with the guitar at maximum volume, and the Overdrive channel's Drive set up to break up pretty heavily, I used the Overdrive volume control to balance the two sounds together. I have to say that I was well-pleased with the result, being able to roll back the guitar volume to clean things up for rhythm, use dynamics to pop bits of distortion in and out of fills and then wind things back up for a raucous lead sound.

The interacting tone controls work as modifiers rather than repairers. In other words, there isn't enough swing in them to drastically change what you're hearing, but they do enable you to tailor an already good sound to perfection. The reverb sounds as good as any that I've ever heard, and the ability to have two footswitchable reverb levels is just sheer luxury.

You'll remember that I said back at the start of this section that the 15/30 is a relatively transparent amp, and that is because it has two different tonalities in its 15- and 30-Watt guises. Set at 30 Watts, it has a fairly forward sound that seems tilted towards the higher mid-range part of the audio spectrum. On stage this comes in very useful as it lets the 15/30 shine through the rest of the band. This tonality isn't based on that painful, glassy cut that takes your head off, but it seems to me that the 15/30 has an emphasised clarity in 30-Watt operation.

Throttled back to 15 Watts, the amplifier reveals a warmer, more rounded sound much more suited to domestic and studio surroundings. It's not that it is that much quieter at this lower power, it's just a more 'comfortable' sound, as though the amplifier is operating well inside its comfort zone with a cup of cocoa and wearing its slippers. If I owned one, this is where I'd have it set virtually permanently.

Finally, there's that balanced XLR DI output with its dedicated level control. The output coming from its own dedicated transformer tap has been very carefully voiced to match as closely as possible the sound of the 15/30 driving into a Celestion Century loudspeaker. For me, the 15/30 gave the best DI'd sound that I've ever heard from any loudspeaker emulator/dummy load setup that I either own or have tried. I can't think of any other amplifier where a carefully and specifically voiced DI is driven from a dedicated output transformer tap. Add in the onboard dummy load that protects the output valves (and the transformer) and you've got the perfect bedroom/stage/studio amplifier that can be used to drive power amps, as a valve preamp for bigger amp heads, direct into a mixing console, and so on. I ran the 15/30's DI into a Starfield stereo valve power amp driving a pair of Boogie Thiel 1 x 12's, into my recording setup, into a PA mixer and direct into my Bose L1 system, and I just couldn't fault the results. This has got to be the best DI output on a valve guitar amplifier that I've ever come across, bar none.

Conclusion

As you've probably guessed by now, I loved the Barnett Davies 15/30. It is easy to carry, easy to set up, easy to use, easy to get a great sound with and it makes playing guitar through it a real pleasure. To add icing to the cake, each one is individually and beautifully hand built to a standard not always seen these days. The design and construction reflect the care, enthusiasm and dedication that Clive and Dave have brought to the project, and the DI output and dual reverb levels are a great piece of thoughtful engineering that confirm just how much they have considered the practical needs of the gigging guitarist.

Of course, there is a downside amidst my euphoria and that is simply the price. £1595 is a lot of money for a tiny combo amplifier from a small, relatively unknown British maker. In this age of Western design coupled with Chinese manufacture, £1595 is a lot of money for a 30-Watt combo amplifier of any size, from any maker. In the case of the Barnett Davies 15/30 I personally think that the investment is more than justifiable, but you're going to have to come to your own decision on that one. If you're even remotely considering purchasing an amplifier (vintage or modern) in this price range then you really need to audition a 15/30 before making your final decision — it's at the top of my list. ■ ■ PM



The Barnett Davies 15/30 features a built-in dummy load, a switch that selects either 15- or 30-Watt operation and a speaker-simulated DI output on XLR, accompanied by its own volume control.