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On Test

Session 15:30

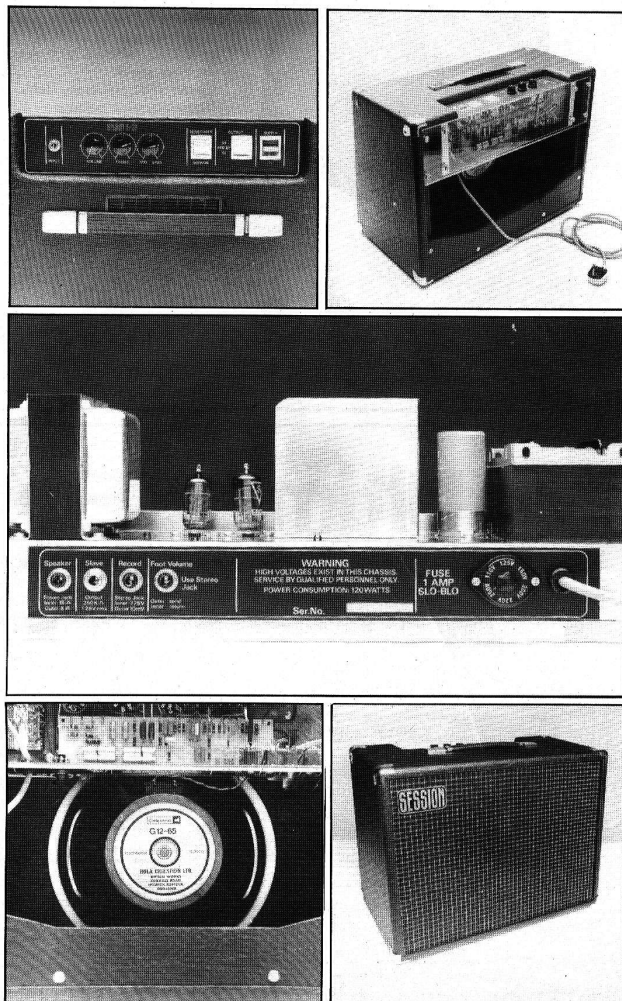
I suppose with the continuing controversy regarding valves and valve sound amps, inevitably more and more all-valve amps will find their way onto the market.

Apart from the hybrids such as Peavey and the specials like Mesa-Boogie, the majority of the all-valve amps available are direct descendants of the old Marshall amps. So a brand new all valve amp combo from a never before heard of manufacturer who claims that it outperforms many other transistorised amplifiers must be interesting.

The combo is simply called "Session" and is a 15/30 watt valve combo. As the name implies it has been designed specifically for the session musician to use in the studio where he wants a good basic valve sound. Apparently a lot of time and effort has gone into making this amp both sound good and, importantly, ultra quiet in operation as it is amazing just how mechanically and electronically noisy many amps are. Each amplifier is hand built in this country and sold direct to users rather than going through the normal dealer network and so hopefully keeping the price down. Anyway, important things first.

The combo is small, just 22½ inches wide, 17 inches high and 12 inches deep at the bottom. The cabinet is constructed from ¾ inch plywood and is of the open back type design, covered in coarse black vinyl. All corners are protected with chrome corner caps. The front panel slopes back slightly from the vertical and across this front panel is a rather nice black and silver speaker grille which protects the single 12 inch Celestion G12-65 loudspeaker.

The chassis is mounted in the conventional fashion (for a combo) direct onto a panel which bolts just inside the top of the cabinet. On the test amp this panel was made of Perspex so that the underside of the chassis could be seen.



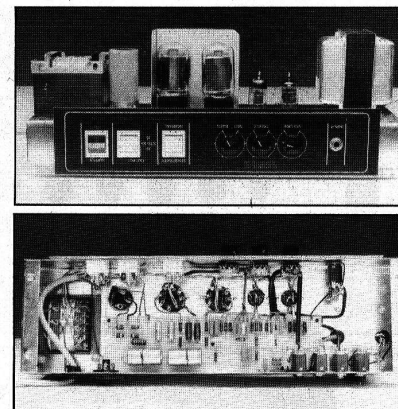
The chassis in fact sits on its side with the control panel upwards and the valves facing forwards. The output valves used are 6L6's and ECC 33's in the pre-amp. One problem initially was that one of the pre-amp valves fell out as there was no retaining clip on either valve.

The chassis and electronics are in fact very well laid out and beautifully put together. A single glass fibre printed circuit board is used with valves and valve holders mounted direct into the chassis, if this is typical of hand built amps then I am very much impressed.

Top panel controls are very straightforward, three rocker switches are provided — one red illuminated (neon type) for mains, one three position white next to it for selecting low or high power (15 or 30 watts) with standby in the centre and a two position white switch for high or low sensitivity. To the left of this bank of switches are the three rotary controls — volume, treble and mid/bass (interesting control this — more about it later). The effect of white switches and graphics on a black background is nice, in fact I think the whole combo without the usual piping and bits of trim everywhere looks good — however that is just a personal opinion.

Right, so the amp doesn't sound really exciting so far does it? Well perhaps it isn't, but really the important thing is how does it perform. The manufacturer was very careful to point out to us that the amp has been designed with two considerations in mind. One is to keep the electronics as quiet and noise-free as possible (including using a special mains transformer in order to reduce lamination buzz) and two, to make sure that the amp sounds good to the ear. It is not necessarily the case that an amp designed to look good on paper and on test will in fact produce a good sound.

I have to say that I spent a



little time wondering whether or not the amp was on when first plugged in to the mains, it is so quiet that my usual test of tuning the gain and/or volume up full did not produce any real noise or hum.

The first guitar to be used was the old faithful Gibson Les Paul, I suppose I should not really always use this guitar first as it tends to make any amp sound good. Anyway it did sound good — very good.

The first thing I noticed was that although the tone controls did not at first sight appear to give very much control, they were in fact well judged and provided a useful range. The Les Paul does not usually re-

quire a lot of tone correction so the controls were more than adequate. I was however concerned that the Strat would suffer a little as, depending on conditions, it is sometimes necessary to use a lot of tone correction. But in fact the Strat sounded excellent.

This was mainly due to the operation of the mid/bass control which had a slightly strange effect. Anti clockwise rotation of this control from the centre gave a sort of mid-frequency boost and clockwise rotation gave bass boost. Although this sounds a bit cumbersome it does extremely well — surprisingly so. I would say though that for on-stage

use, where all sorts of conditions are encountered, there would probably not be enough control — but this is not designed for that type of situation. In the studio where most effects and equalization are done at the mix-down using much more sophisticated control, this amp works well.

So much for the basic sound, this being a valve amp with switchable output power it would not seem unreasonable to suppose that under overdrive conditions it again would produce an excellent sound. When switched to low power (15 watts) the sound was very nice but not quite as much sustain as I expected, even when switched to the high input sensitivity.

Still, as I have stressed already, this amp is designed for studio use and the sort of equalization and effect normally associated with transistor amps is just not required. My own personal preference for an amp, is one without any special effects such as reverb or phasing or whatever, but which just produces a good basic sound.

The general reaction from other guitarists was very favourable. During the limited time available for the test, the amp was used on one or two sessions where, although the guitarists who used it were not ecstatic about the range of sounds it produced initially, were very impressed by the end result. It is often better to record a straight sound first and then do what is necessary to modify the sound afterwards — this usually results in a far more natural sound.

Okay, so overall impressions are very good. If the production amps are all to the same standard as this review sample then at a price of £195 complete with castors and cover and delivery (direct from Axxess Electronic Ltd., Viables Lane, Basingstoke, Hants) I would rate this combo as one of the best buys at the moment.

Dave Mann

Test Report

- 1 POWER OUTPUT Measured at 1kHz just prior to clipping into 8 ohms.
HIGH — 32.5 watts RMS
LOW — 14.2 watts RMS
- 2 TONE CONTROLS — RANGE
TREBLE — 11.2dB@10kHz
MID/BASS — Control produced several different effects — so difficult to measure.
- 3 INPUT SENSITIVITY
NORMAL — 6mV RMS for full output at 1kHz
HIGH — 2.5mV
- 4 HUM AND NOISE
S/N (High sensitivity)
HIGH — 69dB
LOW — 71 dB