

AXESS Amps 'Sessionette 75' Combo (RRP £250 inc. footswitch and VAT)

Late last Summer I was walking down a certain street in Central London, slowly making my way towards an instrument shop I had to visit, when my ears picked up the sound of an electric guitar wailing in the semi-distance; the sound in the hazy atmosphere coming and going but penetrating right down through my memory to recall the sort of sound that I'd dreamed of being able to get when I was younger and enthralled by players like Peter Green, Beck, Mick Taylor and all those classic guitarists who seemed to be able to make an electric guitar cry — when all I could do was make it go 'clunk' or 'rasp'!

When I got to the shop I was met by a sight that I certainly hadn't anticipated. A customer had a Strat plugged in, but in place of the valve stack I'd expected was a tiny, rather plain-looking amp, bearing the name 'Session'.

I'd come across this make of amps before — even down to having indulged in some fairly argumentative correspondence with their maker and designer, Stewart Ward, in public, in another publication now defunct. Since then his name had been mentioned to me time and time again by players and retailers, all of whom were telling me that he had developed a tiny, transistorised combo the likes of which they'd never heard before — the Sessionette 75.

"SESSION AMPS HAVE BECOME THE FOCUS OF A STREET RUMOUR WHICH TELLS TREMENDOUS TALES..."

So here it was, this amp they'd been talking about, being tried out by that shop's customer. The sound he was getting was remarkable, and right there and then I determined to borrow an amp from Stewart and review it. Session amps have become the focus of a street rumour which tells tremendous tales of their abilities. Stewart appears to be selling them as fast as he can make them (especially overseas), and it took some very deliberate action on both our parts to get this

review together. Even then, it was through the good offices of London's Chalk Farm dealer, Ed Jones of the London Rock Shop, who selflessly lent us one out of his own stock, that I finally got my guitar jacked into one. Axess Electronics (Stewart's company) is currently expanding its manufacturing capacity to keep pace with demand, and he was mid-move when the space for a review came up. Stewart was almost depleted of a amps while he sorted his move out, and if the London Rock Shop hadn't come to our

"FOR A COMBO RATED AT 75 WATTS, THE SESSIONETTE IS ALMOST TINY... IT IS HOWEVER, STURDY AND WELL MADE."

rescue, then there could have been yet another delay before this review appeared. So, what was it that appealed to my ears about this Sessionette amp? Would it prove to be as good on test as everyone predicted, and as I had heard back last Summer in that West End dealer's?

For a combo rated at 75 watts, the Sessionette is almost tiny. It measures about 15" x 17" x 9" and the black vinyl covering and black-and-silver grille cloth don't exactly make it stand up and shout at you. It is, however, sturdy and well made.

The Sessionette features a dual set of controls. The main operating panel is on the top, and it features the following facilities: single jack input, gain 1, gain 2, filter, gain B, treble, middle, bass and reverb, plus a red mains switch. Above the gain 1/2 pots is a small white rocker switch marked 'Eq set' and 'Eq in', matched by another above the filter and gain B pots marked as Channel A and Channel B. There is also an intermediate setting.

On the (sealed) back of the amp is one of the most comprehensive ranges of facilities that you'll find on any combo: jack socket for extension speaker, socket for headphones, DIN socket for the footswitch (supplied with the amp and included in the RRP of £250 inc VAT), twin sockets for effects send and

MUSIC U.K.



return, socket for monitor output plus a pot which governs the monitor output level.

Finally, there's an input socket for mains via the usual IEC mains connector.

The top panel of the amp is actually a bit forbidding when you first face it. You jack in your guitar, and then start trying to untangle the meaning of the terms 'gain 1', 'gain 2', 'filter', 'gain B' and those two rockers with their various setting positions.

What in actual fact it *does* all mean when you've worked it out is relatively simple. Plugged into the Sessionette, your amp's channel is determined either by the rocker switch being set to Channel A or Channel B or, if it is set in the centre, by the footswitch selector. There is, however, an additional option: detach the footswitch, set the rocker switch in the centre, so that both channels are on, and blend the two sets of channel controls together to get your sound.

The rocker marked 'Eq In/Set' is also easy to grasp once you understand the simple principle that the amp can either have a predetermined tonal response (marked 'set', a position which cancels the tone controls so that they have no effect whatsoever on the amp's sound), or have the tonal controls fully functioning, when the rocker is set 'in'.

The rest of the amp's operation is quite straightforward. You select which channel you want (A or B), and then begin by setting the tonal response for the channel

you've chosen. Channel 'A' is the dirty one, Channel 'B' is clean. On Channel B the tonal response of the Sessionette is quite *remarkably* clean and almost relentlessly pure — it's got a lot of the better qualities of a traditional Fender amp about it, in fact; producing a sparkling, almost 'cut glass' sound which is so bright in the treble ranges (especially when I tested it with my Fender Jag) that you could almost cut your ears on it! The tonal range from the three pots is good and supremely effective — and, glory be, there is a near-supernatural lack of hum and buzz in the sound, even at quite high gain levels with single coil pickups — essential in a studio, of course.

Throw that rocker switch over to 'A' or hit the footswitch and you're into the 'dirty' sound. Here the volume of the channel is governed by the second of the two gain controls, the amount of distortion being fundamentally controlled by the first pot. In

"DISTORTION TO A DEGREE THAT'S EVENTUALLY ALMOST VIOLENT."

addition, however, to the amount of distortion which you can wind into the amp's tone with the first gain pot, you also have the use of the filter pot which, as you rotate it towards full, increases the sharpness of the distortion to a degree that's eventually almost violent.

To further affect the sound from the Sessionette you also have the facility to switch out the tone controls altogether, and this is done by throwing the Eq In/Out switch over to 'Eq Set'. In this mode the tone controls are completely disabled, only the rotary filter control working. It has the effect of warming and rounding the distorted sound, smoothing it towards an archetypal valve distortion with a less jagged form of square wave transistorised tone.

If all this sounds a shade complex, well it is and it isn't! At first you play around with the Sessionette combo's settings, naturally using the clean 'B' channel for the sparkling, Fender-valve-amp-like response that it offers,