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Matchless: 30:15-TR & King Cobra

By Dave Hunter

EVER SINCE THE COMPANY'S ARRIVAL IN 1989, the two-channel DC-30 has been the flagship of the Matchless fleet. While establishing a benchmark for boutique amp construction, this amplifier also redefined two Vox-inspired channel topologies for the modern era: The chimey, shimmering 12AX7 preamp, and the hot, fat EF86 pentode preamp. Now, two new Matchless models divvy up these voices and inject them into the front ends of a pair of fresh designs—the stripped-down 30/15 and the regal King Cobra. Between them, they cater to guitarists looking for a little more, and a little less, from this famed California amplifier company.

### 30/15-TR

In its base form, the 30/15 head (which retails for \$1,999, sans tremolo, reverb, and effects loop) is the most affordable 30-watter Matchless has ever offered. The 30/15-TR still carries just a single input, Volume, Tone, and Master Volume controls, but adds reverb and tremolo. Savings are made in the exclusion of many of the little extras that the DC-30 and other big Matchless amps abound in. There are no utility AC sockets, no speaker impedance or phase switches, no push-pull bypass mode on the Master Volume, no second rectifier socket, and no effects loop (it's included here as a \$50 add-on). Also, the 30/15's preamp is more like that of Matchless' smaller Spitfire model, with a simple treble-bleed Tone control, rather than the Top Boost-style EQ stage of the C-30 format (which requires a second 12AX7 tube). It does, however, retain Matchless' Hi/Lo Power switch—which, in fact, gives the 30/15 its name. On Hi, you get 30 watts from four EL84s (cathode bias, no negative feedback), while Lo disengages two of the output tubes to cut the power to 15 watts. In addition, the back panel has output jacks for 4½, 8½, and 16½ speakers, and, on this version, TRS (stereo) jacks for the effects loop and the optional reverb/tremolo footswitch.

Matchless 3015The 30/15 combo is dressed in a nifty charcoal-sparkle covering with a silver sparkle fascia panel, and it carries a single 12" Celestion G12H-30 speaker in an open-back cab made from quality 11-ply birch plywood. It's a compact rig at 20" x 20 1/2" x 10 1/2", but the rugged cabinetry and tank-like chassis—not to mention the heavy iron-core original design transformers—bring it in at a hefty 65 lbs. From switches, to pots to shock-mounted tube sockets, everything here feels built to

withstand the big one. Slide out the chassis, and this initial impression of craftsmanship is multiplied tenfold. The term “point-to-point” is often used loosely to define hand-wired amplifiers—many of which use eyelet, tag, or turret boards as a form of circuit board. Strictly speaking, however, it describes exactly what you find inside any Matchless chassis: components connected directly to each other—potentiometer terminal to coupling capacitor to tube socket—without use of an intervening master-circuit board. To facilitate this type of construction, Matchless places the preamp tube sockets close to the controls that govern their functions. This means the signal runs are about as short as can be. The flipside is that changing some preamp tubes can be a little tricky without flipping the amp on its head or removing the chassis.

Even with its simplified preamp, the 30/15-TR is all about chime, bloom, and multi-dimensional tone. With a '57 Fender Esquire plugged in, Volume at 11 o'clock, Tone at noon, and power on Hi, this amp blossoms with shimmering harmonics and a clean, taut definition that bites just enough when you dig in to put a little mustard on your lead runs. I got it up to around two o'clock before the single-coil bridge pickup induced any real dirt into the equation, and outright crunch only came to town by around four o'clock (the humbuckers on a Gibson Les Paul VOS goldtop reissue got things singing a couple of notches earlier). As such, it's great at the twang and jangle, but less inclined to rock if you can't get it toward full throttle. No sweat—the 30/15-TR interacts beautifully with pedals, and even a low-gain overdrive such as the Barber LTD kicks it easily into juicy saturation. If you are playing in situations that let you max the volume, the resultant tubey overdrive is to die for— it's sweet, rich, breathy, and extremely dynamic. The Lo Power setting doesn't drop sound levels by a full half, but it does cut volume and headroom perceptibly, and makes the combo more studio and smallclub friendly.

With the King Cobra 2x12 combo, Matchless continues a tradition of mismatching speakers to create richer tonal textures.

#### KING COBRA

Based around the DC-30's “high gain” pentode preamp with its simple Volume control and 6-position Tone switch, the King Cobra's first gain stage feeds a class-A output section based on a pair of cathode-biased EL34s (with no negative feedback) to generate around 35 watts. There's also a Master Volume to rein in output levels when you need to, and a Cut control to tame highs. All-tube reverb and tremolo come standard on this model, and the 2x12 configuration carries the mismatched speaker combination that the DC-30 is known for—a Celestion G12M Greenback and G12H-30 wired in parallel in the same cab for a more complex sonic presentation.

Matchless King Cobra Given its bigger package, this King Cobra has a more formidable feel right from the start. It isn't over-sized for a combo at 27" x 21" x 10", but it's absolutely a beast to haul at 85 lbs, and pretty much a two-person lift. Matchless has always had a penchant for the EF86 pentode preamp tube, and I can dig where they're coming from. This bottle has significantly more gain than a 12AX7, yet it doesn't exhibit the slightly tizzy, sizzly distortion that the more common twin triode can belt out when driven hard. Instead, the EF86 gives you a firm, fat, full-voiced response all the way across the dial—not distorting in itself so much as slamming the gain into the next stage down the line. As such, it handles effects pedals very well, but also roars in its own right when cranked au naturel—a performance the King Cobra dishes out with ease with a Les Paul and the Volume up about half way. Push it further, and it's an absolute screamer, but retains impressive fidelity and clarity.

Rein it in a little, and there's plenty of spank and jangle, even with humbuckers, while my Esquire's single-coil nails a thick, trenchant breed of snap and twang. It's a clearer, more versatile voice than you might expect from this package, but with more hair on it than exhibited by the 30/15 at similar volume levels—thanks to that gutsy EF86. It's impossible to approach any EL34-based amp without the word "Marshall" lurking in the back of your mind, but the King Cobra is far more of an all-rounder than its output tubes might imply. Settings from clean to crunch are sweet, crystalline, and Vox-like, but with a round, musical frequency response and a broad soundstage. Start rolling in effects, and this straightforward package gives you a broad palette to paint with. The reverb is lush and rich, but introduces itself smoothly all the way up the dial without going watery or distant too quickly. The tremolo is pliant and bubbly, and it excels at anything from a deep, slow, buoyant pulse to a fast, subtle shimme. It's also beautifully responsive to your playing, stepping back a little when you play hard, but flowing forward with more definition when you ease off on the pick attack or let a chord hang. Combined, they make for hypnotic stuff.

All in all, the King Cobra and 30/15-TR follow familiar and tested formats from Matchless, while representing a clever recombining of classic ingredients into two highly desirable new packages—each rendered with the tonal virtue and superior build quality we have come to expect from this 20-year-old maker.