

HighBeam Research

Title: Matchless clubman. (guitar amplifier) (Evaluation)

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Matchless hit the amp scene with a bang a few years ago with their Vox-inspired C-30. The handbuilt amp carved a niche among guitarists, and Matchless is now a respected contender in the amp biz. The Clubman '35 (\$1,239) was unveiled at this year's NAMM show, yet we were only recently able to get our mitts on a review model. Here's the scoop: The Clubman is a 35-watt, all-tube, single-channel head that uses a pair of EL34 output tubes in Class A configuration. The Clubman sports a heavy steel chassis with folded, spotwelded corners and a 13-ply birch cabinet. Machine screws are used to secure the rear panel. Nice touch. The tube sockets are mounted to the chassis on silicone rubber washers that allow the sockets to flex. In addition, the rectifier and power tubes are secured in their sockets with adjustable steel straps that hold the tubes very securely. (We recommend you remove the power tubes before trying to get the chassis in or out of the cabinet: There's not much clearance between tubes and wood; we shattered an EL34 by not taking this precaution.)

There's a lot of hand work in the Clubman's boiler room, and it's obvious that Matchless strived to make it as bulletproof as possible. This amp features multi-level, point-to-point wiring that requires no circuit boards. All the components are neatly soldered directly to the pots, jacks, switches, and phenolic terminal strips. In addition, all the resistors and caps have Teflon tubing on their pigtailed to prevent shorts if they somehow touch. We saw little freeform wiring --the majority of the cabling is neatly bundled and tied. Matchless points out that they use overrated components throughout. All the resistors are either 1- or 2-watt types when 1/4 or 1/2 watters would have been adequate.

The Clubman features a 5AR4/GZ34 tube rectifier and an unusual preamp tube scheme consisting of a 6AT6 input stage and a 6SH7 for tone control recovery and effects loop duty. Since these are different tubes from the 12AX7s you find in 99.9% of guitar amps, we quizzed Mark Samson, Matchless' engineer and co-owner, about this deviation from the status quo. He explained, "I'm so sick of using 12AX7s that I decided to find something different. The 6AT6 has a gain structure similar to a 12AY7 (a lower-gain version of the 12AX7). Also, no one is currently making 12AY7s.

"The reason we use the 6SH7 is because the unique tone circuit causes a significant signal drop, and we needed something that would make up the gain loss. The choice was to use either two stages of a 12AX7 or do it with a single high-gain pentode. We opted for the latter because it's something no one else does. Also, when you go through both sides of a 12AX7, you have twice the chance of having a bad tube. The 6AT6 was used in virtually every car radio made in the '50s and '60s, and the 6SH7 was used in several different stages of televisions. They're both very common and easy to find."

To find out what this baby sounds like, we grabbed a Fender SRV Strat, a '59 Gibson Les Paul Junior, a G&L ASAT, an ASAT Classic, and a PRS Classic Electric, and trudged off to the house of pain. Matchless supplied us with an open-back cabinet loaded with a single 12[inches] Celestion 30-watt speaker modified to Matchless' specs. Just for fun, we brought along a '70s Hiwatt 4x12, equipped with original Fane speakers, and a Marshall 4x10 with 35-watt Celestions.

There's not much to getting the Clubman up and running: Select the appropriate speaker jack (4[ohm], 8[ohm], or 16[ohm]), flick on the juice, and away you go. Five internal lamps illuminate the Clubman's front panel from the inside, while another set lights the Matchless logo. The logo lights up when the power is

switched on, but the panel markings are illuminated only when the amp is taken off standby.

The Clubman's front panel is pure simplicity. There are five knobs--volume, bass, treble, brilliance, and master--plus a pair of input jacks and the standby and power toggles. For starters, we set all the knobs halfway up and flicked the switch. We were instantly greeted with a solid, steely tone, crisp and harmonically rich. Turning up the guitar volume yielded increasing growl and crunch with no loss of harmonic detail. Even in complex, heavily distorted fingerpicking passages the individual notes remained distinct, never mushing into unintelligible glop.

Jacking the Clubman's preamp knob to about 3 o'clock gave copious amounts of silky distortion, but it was always possible to get a very clean rhythm sound simply by rolling the guitar's volume knob down. The Clubman is certainly one of the most dynamic amps we've ever played. We preferred the sound of P-90 pickups or humbuckers when going for the most grungy tones, however. Our single-coil guitars sounded best for clean to medium-distortion stuff.

The Clubman's tone controls are interactive and very effective--especially the bass knob. It has tons of range, but we noticed some floppiness when large amounts of bass were applied at high volume. We really dig the top-end response and clarity obtainable via the brilliance and treble knobs. When running the amp at low master-volume settings, these controls really help your definition.

After experimenting with various speaker cabinet combos, we found, not surprisingly, the Hiwatt 4x12 to be our favorite. The Matchless 1x12 would be great for small gigs or recording, as would the Marshall 4x10, but the Clubman just sounded so much bigger and louder through the 4x12. (Matchless also makes open-back 2x10 and 4x12 cabinets.) The Clubman is loud enough to cut it in most club situations, but we're talking 35 watts here, and no matter what anyone tells you about the abilities of Class A, this amp won't blast like a 50-watt

Marshall or Hiwatt. The Clubman also lacks the crushed-glass brilliance and transient response of the British beasts. Admittedly, comparing the Clubman to these amps is moot, since it wasn't designed to sound like a Marshall or a Hiwatt. But the power consideration is real. This is a blues, country, and R&B amp, not a hard rock or metal machine. Think hot-rodded Fender Bassman or even Trainwreck Express territory.

Matchless has packed high sensitivity and superior dynamics in a medium-powered amp. The Clubman has its own sound, and we found that the more we wailed, the more we liked it. The amp's ability to preserve detail throughout its gain ranges while producing rich, harmonically saturated distortion is impressive. You'd be hard put to get a bad sound out of this guy.

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