

Title: Tiny tube terrors. (guitar amplifiers)(Evaluation)

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Matchless recently added to their exemplary line of handbuilt tube amps with the introduction of the Lightning, Tornado, and Spitfire 15-watt combos. These EL84-powered, single-channel midgets offer the small-amp aficionado a level of quality and performance that far surpasses the vast majority of amps in the 20-watt-and-under class. Not surprisingly, they're also the most expensive low-watt production combos around. All three Matchless amps share identical construction features like welded-steel chassis, point-to-point handwiring on terminal strips, silver-plated stranded-copper wiring, carbon-composition resistors, specially designed coupling capacitors, Switchcraft jacks, and Teflon sleeving to protect component leads. The circuitry is painstakingly laid out to avoid excess wire, and even the transformers--the heart and soul of any amp--are meticulously hand-wound.

Like Matchless' full-size amps, these little guys feature backlit front panels, line-level outs, solid-ply cabinets, and groovy covering options. Other cool details include felt-covered chassis edges that seal and cushion, nifty tubes "hats" to keep the output tubes in place, and shockmounted tube sockets. Each amp is equipped with a special 12" Celestion Vintage 30 speaker modified to smooth the upper-bass hump and extend the bottom end. Matchless' Mark Sampson says the goal was to emulate the sweeter top-end and midrange definition of 20-year-old Celestions.

The Lightning (\$1,499) offers the same bass and treble control circuit as Matchless' popular C-30 amplifiers, a design whose roots are in the Vox AC30 Top Boost. The highly effective and very interactive tone controls yield an incredible range of sounds. The Lightning's output section is a cathode-biased, class-A circuit with no negative feedback. This design produces exceptional harmonic density, richness, and complexity, and is common to all of Matchless'

EL84-powered amps. Our Lightning came equipped with three Sovtek 12AX7WB preamp tubes, two General Electric EL84s, and a Sovtek 5AR4 rectifier. The master volume control is located after the phase-inverter tube. This allows you to crank the preamp volume and overdrive the phase inverter if desired.

Compared to my trusty '63 Fender Deluxe, the Lightning is more aggressive-sounding and has a ballsier upper-midrange grind. It also has more top-end sizzle and a lot more overdrive than the Fender. The lightning is a surprisingly loud 15-watter with plenty of clean headroom at low to medium volumes. Its great tone and flexibility make it an ideal studio choice.

The Tornado (\$1,399) is a pint-sized potentate with an ultra-minimal preamp and a single treble-cut tone control. The only frill is a modulated output-tube tremolo (like a Vox Berkeley) that sounds especially strong and solid. While our green-clad Tornado couldn't match the Lightning's volume, overdrive, or tonal breadth, its sweeter, more delicate sound will appeal to those valuing sonic detail and beauty over raw power.

With its black-fleck vinyl covering, the Spitfire (\$1,299) is the tribe's well-dressed savage. This little demon's circuit features the same preamp and tone controls as the Tornado, but the two halves of its gain-stage 12AX7 are wired in parallel. This is similar to linking the channels on a four-input Marshall, and it gives the Spitfire meatier tone. The amp also has the same post-phase-inverter master volume found on the Lightning. In terms of overdrive potential, however, the Spit is in between the Tornado and Lightning. Our Spitfire came with two Yugoslavian 12AX7s, two GE EL84s, and a Chinese 5AR4.

Compared to the Tornado, the Spitfire sounds thicker, darker, and rawer. It has a rich, punchy lead tone when driven hard, and more midrange bark (though far less tonal range) than the Lightning. The Spitfire is probably best suited for players who lust for a bone-simple studio amp with big tube grind. You'd have a hard time beating this amp for crunchy rhythms and fat, medium-distortion leads.

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