

**GUITAR BUYER
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THE POWER AND THE PASSION

THE RUMOURS ARE TRUE! IN A WORLD EXCLUSIVE, DAN STEINHARDT INSPECTS THE FIRST MATCHLESS C-30 WITH REVERB EVER MADE

For those uninitiated in the world of modern boutique guitar amps, Matchless is the company that pretty much started it all, and they did it with this amp's predecessor, the Matchless DC-30. Introduced in the late 1980s, Matchless believed this amp to be the ultimate Class-A, EL84-powered amp, a genre established by the Vox AC30. The DC-30 took the guitar world by storm with its incredible tone, rugged reliability and eye-catching appearance – when you turn on a Matchless amplifier, the front panel logo literally lights up so no one is in any doubt as to the brand of amp you're using.

Since the launch of the DC-30, the proverbial flood gates have been opened and the market is now awash with incredible hand-made amps that take their cues from vintage classics, but through it all, the Matchless range has been held aloft as the benchmark for many boutique builders. Every Matchless amp is built by hand, one component at a time, with their trademark 'absolutely no compromise' attitude in every area from conception to construction. Features like point-to-point wiring using no circuit boards at all, shock-mounted valve sockets for prolonged valve life and the use of specially selected and tested components have resulted in an exclusive brand of amplifier that absolutely screams quality and can be

seen on stage with many of the world's top professional musicians.

For the best part of two decades we've had the wonderful C-30 series (currently containing the HC-30 head, SC-30 1x12 and DC-30 2x12 combos), and although Matchless has added a full range of models to its catalogue, it is widely held that the DC-30 is the amp the company will be remembered for... until now, that is. Matchless has added reverb to other amps before but this is the first time that they've added it to their benchmark C-30. Matchless top man Phil Jamison built this particular amp himself and went through the design component by component, building what he believes to be arguably the best amplifier the company has ever made.



PRE & POWER AMP

The C-30 Reverb is a two-channel amplifier, the channels being selected using the included footswitch. On the original C-30, each channel has separate inputs so you need an A/B pedal to remotely switch channels. This amp's setup of a single input (with 'hi' and 'lo' sockets) and channel select footswitch is, in our opinion, an infinitely better configuration.

The channels can be switched by any simple on/off contact switch and although the supplied footswitch doesn't have an LED to indicate which channel you're using, there are dozens of footswitches easily available that use an LED indicator. The switching is silent, which is great considering the volume this amp is capable of.

The first channel utilises two 12AX7 preamp valves in parallel and is commonly used as the clean channel. The bass and treble controls for this channel are interactive, meaning that dialling one will also affect the other. Next is the volume control for this channel, which, depending on whether you use the low or high input, stays either pretty clean as you turn it up or gives the amp more natural overdrive. It must be said that this is one of the first amps we've ever heard that has a low input that you can actually use. In fact, it sounds wonderful, like you've notched the volume back a touch on

"THE REVERB SOUNDS NOTHING SHORT OF GLORIOUS"

your guitar. The high input reveals natural drive tones that really need to be experienced, not just heard, but we'll get to these presently.

Meanwhile, the second channel on this amp is where the original scored massive points, and this amp is exactly the same. The preamp section uses a single EF86 valve, which is capable of much more gain than a normal 12AX7, with a tighter bottom end and a slightly more pushed mid-range response. This is commonly used as the overdrive or solo channel due to the amount of gain available, but you can set it up for a differently voiced clean tone as well.

The second channel's single tone control uses a rotary switch to access a capacitor array that gives you different bottom end configurations. Don't worry if this seems limiting, as it's carefully voiced to let you dial in the appropriate amount of bottom end for the instrument you're using and the room you're playing in.

On full power using all four EL84 output valves, the C-30 is rated at around 35 watts but our guess is this amp was rated by someone who'd had their ears surgically removed, as the C-30 would lay to waste many 50-watt

amps we've heard! Another great feature is the amp's half-power mode, which turns a pair of the output valves off giving you around 18 watts of output, but even in this mode it's still a seriously loud amp built for the guitarist who wants to get out there and be heard.

There is also a master volume control that is bypassed unless engaged by pulling the knob out. This gives you all the benefits and headroom of a non-master volume amp as well as instant access to a control over the level of both channels. Finally we have the reverb control. This circuit uses a couple of 12AX7 valves and a big old spring tank in the back of the head and sounds nothing short of glorious, but we'll get to that in a minute.

The Matchless C-30 also has the facility to use either one 5AR4 (GZ34) or two 5V4 (GZ32) rectifier valves to give you some choices as far as what sort of flavour of rectification you use. For our tests, we're using a single GZ34 for a faster attack but we highly recommend spending some time experimenting with this, as the ability to fine tune an amp's rectification character is such a great feature. ➔

GBINFO

MATCHLESS

MATCHLESS C-30 REVERB

PRICE: TBA (around £2,700)

BUILT IN: USA

TYPE: All-valve head

POWER: 35 watts, switchable to 18 watts

VALVES: 4 x EL84, 5 x 12AX7, 1 x EF86, 1 x 5AR4 (or 2 x 5V4)

FEATURES: 2 switchable channels, hi & lo inputs, 12AX7 channel with volume, bass & treble controls, EF86 channel with volume & tone controls, global reverb & master volume controls, power hi/lo switch, speaker phase normal/reverse switch, footswitch input, 2 x speaker outputs (4, 8 or 16 ohms)

FOOTSWITCH: Channel select footswitch included

DIMENSIONS: 273(h) x 550(w) x 241(d) mm

WEIGHT: 22kg (48.5lbs)

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THE INSIDE TRACK

THE C-30 REVERB FEATURES SOME METICULOUS INTERNAL WIRING

■ A quick peek up the skirt of the C-30 Reverb reveals the 'no circuit boards' construction approach for which Matchless is now famous.

Each component is meticulously bent, insulated and soldered in place by hand to military-like specifications with the absolute best materials available.

This is 'point-to-point' wiring in its truest sense. The idea is that true point-to-point construction uses less wire and the shortest, most logical circuit path, thus retaining the purest signal.

Some people will describe an amp that uses an eyelet board (vintage Fenders, for example)



as 'point-to-point' hand-wired but this is not so. Technically, this is called 'direct wire construction', but the eyelet board is still a circuit board. The time and skill that it takes to build an amplifier like this is considerable and it's what has kept Matchless at the top of its class for nearly 20 years.

SOUNDS

Now it's time to get specific. First of all, any comparison to a Vox AC30 stops the second your pick hits the strings. The depth of this amp is epic, beyond anything a stock AC30 could ever hope of delivering, in this reviewer's opinion. In fact, the only element of this amp's sound that is at all reminiscent of an AC30 is its top-end chime, which is legendary and something only an EL84 amp tuned to perfection can produce.

The mid-range, which is one of the most important things to get right in an amp, is voiced so well that the character of any guitar you plug into it, from a Tele to a Les Paul, just leaps out at you. Remember that the mid-range is where the majority of an electric guitar's output operates, so unless this is right the rest is kind of pointless. Of course, speaker choice is the key to getting the best out of any



amp and after trying a bunch of different speakers there's no doubt that Matchless's own cabinets with selected Celestion G12H speakers are a near-perfect match for it.

The 12AX7 clean channel – and we use the term 'clean' loosely as you can set up both channels to be clean or driven – has almost classic Fender overtones to it, with an added vibrancy that Fender amp's only really achieve when they're running flat out, but this quality is evident with the C-30 Reverb no matter what level it's operating at.

As the bass and treble controls are interactive, you can effectively fine tune this channel to any guitar you plug into it very easily. Using the neck pickup of a Tele provides one of the best clean tones we've ever heard, so big but without any bottom-end flap and with a top-end chime that makes you wonder how you've ever lived without it. Over on the bridge pickup it's twang city, with just the right amount of snap and sizzle.

Plugging a Les Paul into the high input reveals a natural low gain tone that becomes more driven as you turn up the volume and the amp starts working harder. Turning on the master volume circuit and turning up the preamp reveals an instant-classic overdriven tone that has a real 'chunk' to each note.

Switching over to the second, EF86-equipped channel produces a tighter bottom end and more push in the mids. It retains the chime in the top end without sounding harsh no matter how hard you push it. Crank this channel and you are treated to a truly massive driven tone that is so responsive it seems to almost pre-empt what you play. Both channels are distinct but perfectly complimentary, and between the two they cover an enormous amount of toneful territory.

If you use stompboxes to enhance your sound, then you're in for a real treat. Both channels absolutely love

pedals. From modulation and delay on your clean channel to vintage fuzz with the dirty channel, a good selection of pedals opens up endless sonic possibilities with this amp.

Getting stompers to work this well with an amp is no mean feat as amps with this much sensitivity in the front end can run the risk of sounding mushy with pedals, but the Matchless remains open and vibrant no matter what you throw at it.

Just the tones from the two amp channels alone would be enough for us to wax lyrical over for days but the fact that it works so well with stompers makes it one of the most flexible amps we've ever heard. You're able to conjure up the most beautifully ethereal clean sounds then, with the hit of a footswitch and a pedal or two, unleash an evil 'take no prisoners' dirt monster. Throw all this into a decent 4x12 cab and it's time to rock out with your frock out!

Now before we get ahead of ourselves, it must be said that, as great as all this is, so far there are no real sonic surprises with this amp. It sounds like a classic Matchless C-30 – absolutely amazing – but nothing that wasn't there with the original. We'll add a little caveat in here: we've run this amp next to an older C-30 head made in 1994, and with the same valves in they sound identical. Not similar, but exactly the same. So don't let anyone tell you the older ones are better cause it just ain't true. Nothing has changed in the near 19 years this amp has been in manufacture, until now.

Dialling in the reverb adds a previously unheard dimension of lush valve-driven reverb to that classic Matchless C-30 tone. Phil Jamison has really pulled out all the stops to get the reverb sounding just right, and although it's nothing less than the C-30 deserves, the results are truly inspiring. The clean sound of these amps has always been legendary, ➔

"IT'S ABOUT HOW THE TONE OF THIS AMP FILLS SPACE"



■ The 12AX7 channel has volume, bass and treble controls

DETAILS

CLASSIC C-30
TONE PLUS LUSH
VALVE-DRIVEN
REVERB



■ The second channel's single tone control uses a rotary switch to access a capacitor array



■ The half-power mode turns a pair of the output valves off giving around 18 watts of output



■ The reverb circuit uses a pair of 12AX7 valves and a large spring reverb tank inside the head



GBVERDICT

MATCHLESS C-30 REVERB

GOLD STARS

- ★ Legendary C-30 tone
- ★ Lush spring reverb
- ★ Improved input configuration

BLACK MARKS

- A reverb on/off footswitch would have been nice

IDEAL FOR...

Everything but death metal, but we're sure it'd have a decent crack at that too!

GBRATING



but with the reverb dialled in this signature sound is taken to a new level, with the C-30's classic chime surrounded by the sort of reverb that only valves and a big spring tank in the amp can provide.

Turning the reverb control a quarter to a third gives a subtle reverb shimmer that sounds great with both channels. Set like this, it's the sort of reverb you can leave on all the time, which is a good thing as the reverb itself is not switchable, so you can't turn it on and off via a footswitch.

The way the reverb works with the EF86 drive channel is every bit as impressive as the 12AX7 clean channel. The depth of the reverb, combined with the tighter bottom end and punchier mid-range of the second channel makes driven tones and single note passages seem to jump off the neck of the guitar.

Turn the reverb up to half way and we're getting into Dick Dale territory, which sounds great, but some noise is introduced at this point. This is a proximity effect of the reverb tray being so close to the amp's transformer, but this will only

happen with the head version of this amp. The combo won't have this problem as the tray will be far enough away not to cause any issues, but then it's not really a problem in this case because in a purely practical sense, all the most useable reverb sounds are there before the noise becomes noticeable. You can also use different valves in the reverb return (12AT7 or 12AX7) for a warmer or darker reverb tone.

We figured that it would be an injustice to you, our readers, to have such a special amp on review and not put it through its paces in various live gig situations – after all, what can you really tell about an amp unless you've heard it in the fire? As part of the reviewing process for this amp, not a word was written until it had been out with us on more than a dozen gigs, from small functions to loud and proud rock gigs. We'll also add that without fail every sound guy has commented on how great this amp sounds, on stage and in the mix. In fact, as loud as some of us have been known to play, we've never once been asked to turn the amp down.

GBCONCLUSION

A MATCHLESS MADE IN HEAVEN

■ If we had to sum up the sound of this amp in one word, it would be 'big' – monstrously, impossibly huge! It's not about the amount of bottom end the amp has, it's about how the tone of this amp fills space. On top of this the sound has such a direct connection with the guitar that it feels almost effortless to play.

To say this amp is special is an understatement. There are other amps in this price range where the interaction can feel a bit laboured, where it seems you need to dig deep to get the most out of it, but with the Matchless C-30 Reverb, if it's in you, this amp will draw it out then share it with everyone in a three-mile radius! Although we do believe that you don't need to spend crazy amounts of cash to sound good, the fact is that tone like this doesn't come cheap. It's a very different market now than when the C-30 series of amps first became available, and if you have this sort of cash to spend on an amp, you are spoiled for choice. However, with the launch of the C-30 Reverb, Matchless has once again firmly re-established itself as the one to beat. **GB**