





Blackstar Artisan A15 & A30 combos £799 & £1,199

Blackstar finally launches its eagerly awaited Artisan series of amps. Were we first in the queue? You betcha... *by Nick Guppy*

What we want to know

1 Who is Blackstar anyway?

You may remember Ian Robinson and Bruce Keir from such amps as Marshall's AVT series and the Mode 4; along with other Marshall ex-pats they left to set up Blackstar Amplification about four years ago. To say they know their stuff is rather like saying Lamborghini makes a good-looking sports car.

2 Does the world need another boutique amp?

When they sound this good and cost dramatically less than the competition without any sacrifice in quality at all, yes!

3 Who are they for?

Serious players at any level who want to rediscover real tone from simple, uncluttered control panels and want top-drawer boutique quality at a relatively affordable price.

Formed by two of the most influential amp designers in the country, Blackstar Amplification has been working for a long time to launch its products and we've been straining at the leash to get our hands on its hand-wired Artisan range. Well the wait is now over, and we're delighted to be the first magazine anywhere to get a look at them.

Designed in Northampton and made in Korea, the Blackstar Artisans benefit from the considerable knowledge of Ian Robinson and Bruce Keir, who in a previous incarnation were responsible for some of the best amps and pedals to come out of Bletchley in recent years.

Both amps share the same sort of build quality we've become used to seeing from some of the top names in boutique amp construction. The joinery standard is clean and neat, with a nice consistency to the large radius dovetailed corners. Look closer at that rich ruby red vinyl covering and try to find the cuts on the corners; there aren't any, just a couple of small triangular infill pieces on the tight inside corners surrounding the control

panels. Apart from that, the vinyl is applied so well it looks almost as if it's been sprayed on. The electronics live inside the cleanest chrome-plated chassis we've ever seen. It's tough, heavy-gauge steel and it needs to be because the transformers on both amps are

substantial – in fact, the A30's are considerably larger than those used on some manufacturers' 100-watt models. The rest of the electrical components live on a long turret board that runs almost the full length of the chassis. Turret board construction is typical of many early British amps; you start with a long strip of insulating material, such as Paxolin or GRP, and drill holes in it along both edges. Into these holes you hammer the turrets – small nickel silver posts about 10mm high. The components are attached to the turrets, with link wires between to make up whatever circuit you need. It's relatively easy to service and, if done properly, very robust.

The standard of wiring on both Artisans is exceptionally high – the turret board itself is fixed to the chassis with metal stand-off bolts, all the components have two or more turns around each turret post, and all the wires are properly laced together and pushed into the chassis corners in order to minimise mains hum. It's also worth pointing out that the soldering is remarkably consistent; not including the valves there are about 70 resistors and capacitors on the A30's turret board, which means a total of around 250 solder joints, and every single one is perfect with the last just as good as the first. The benchmarks for this type of construction have always been the original Hiwatt heads designed by Dave Reeves and wired to military

Both the A15 and A30 models represent a stunning debut by Blackstar into the world of high-end guitar amplification



The A15 can be switched from 15 watts Class A down to five



specification by Harry Joyce. Both Artisan combos easily meet that standard. "I honestly believe that at the moment, these are the best-made amps of their type in the world, at any price," says Ian Robinson. "The folks at the factory in Korea are perfectionists just like us when it comes to getting all the details right."

Designed primarily to appeal to purists, both amps have relatively straightforward control layouts with a few boutique twists: the A15 has two very different dual input channels, each with a volume and tone control. Channel 1 is based on the

classic Marshall 1974, while the EF86-powered Channel 2 is inspired by early Fender Champ tones. A mode control switch allows you to run the output stage in either 15 watts push-pull Class A, or five watts single-ended Class A. Also, the dual input arrangement means you can link both channels together using a short patch lead, adding a lot of flexibility from a deceptively simple layout.

The same thing goes for the A30, where Channel 1 uses another EF86, featuring volume and tone controls combined with a five-way bass shape switch that progressively feeds more bass into the power stage. Channel 2 on the A30 is slightly more traditional, with volume, gain, three-band EQ and a mid shift switch to approximate American and British tonality. Again, you can link both channels with a

short patch lead for a much wider range of sounds than either channel can produce individually.

Sounds

Given the spec and build quality, tonal expectations are high and we aren't disappointed: tested with a standard Fender Strat and a PRS McCarty, the A15 delivers sweet cleans from Channel 2 at lower levels, translating into intricate nuances of harmonic distortion as you push the volume.

Channel 1 offers a more aggressive tonality, with upper mid-range emphasis and punch, especially with a good humbucker supplying the juice. Linking both channels changes things dramatically – all of a sudden the volume controls become tone controls too, as you mix each channel's level to suit.

The A30's more complex preamps deliver vastly increased flexibility. The bass control on Channel 1 makes it a snap to dial in any tone from practically any guitar – distinctive bell-like cleans, fat jazz growl or a biting twang that's perfect for country picking. Channel 2 is easier to get a handle on: push up the gain and volume, select American or Brit

The Rivals

Reviewed by us in issue 290, **Divided By 13's JRT 9/15 head and 1 x 12 cab** (£2,195) is a killer amp that mixes up Vox and Marshall for some of the most awe-inspiring tones we've ever heard from a low-output design. Instead of the EF86 it uses the US equivalent – RCA's 5879 pentode – rare over here but plentiful over there. **Cornford's Hellcat combo** (£1,999) unleashes two channels of point-to-point British muscle with a distinctly American vibe, it's one of the best sounding amps you'll hear on either side of the Atlantic and very versatile – British boutique amp building at its best from a maker with real pedigree and big name clout. The **Carr Slant 6V combo** (from £2,175) is painstakingly put together using point-to-point wiring and the ultimate in audiophile components. It's all wrapped up in a beautifully made cabinet that's as tough as a '53 Chevy pickup truck and sounds totally awesome. With one exception (the Vincent, also made by Steve Carr), this amp has the best clean channel we've ever heard. At the price, you'd want it to though, wouldn't you?

Designed to appeal to the purist, both amps have straightforward control layouts with a few boutique twists



Though both Blackstar amps are versatile, the control panels are kept straightforward



Celestion Vintage 30s are a good choice in the A30. We'd like to hear some G12Hs too

Select American or Brit sauce and let rip – it's a phenomenal medium-gain lead tone that any blues-rocker will love

sauce and let rip – it's a phenomenal medium gain lead tone that any blues-rocker will love. Used in single-ended Class A, both amps warm up and overdrive much easier at lower volume, with a softer and more rounded quality when pushed hard. Noise on both amps is practically non-existent – there's the tiniest bit of hiss from the A30's high gain channel, but that's really it.

Verdict

Both the A15 and A30 models represent a stunning debut by Blackstar into the world of high-end guitar amplification. Designed to appeal to purists and best suited to vintage blues, rock, country or pop sounds if used on their own, there's a lot of tonal flexibility from both these amps, and the quality of that tone is simply outstanding. However, you need to run them both quite loud to get it, so those looking to use ether amp at home would be best advised to pick one or more pedals from Blackstar's superb new range to add low-level drive.

Value for money needs to be considered carefully here. On the face of it both amps are relatively expensive, until you weigh them up against the proper competition. We're talking top-drawer build quality and tone, which you'd have to go to the likes of Carr, Divided By 13, Victoria or THD to match, and compared with this kind of exotica the Artisans start looking

almost too good to be true. Don't think that just because the Blackstars aren't made in a Californian vineyard or Texan bayou that they aren't up there with the best. The A30 is frankly staggering in terms of quality and sonic range. If you're looking for a boutique hand-wired amp, the new name to start asking for is Blackstar. You won't be disappointed – we guarantee it!

The bottom line

We like: Great tone and response from two beautifully made combos that ensure Blackstar's credibility as one of the world's top new amp brands. They really do sound as good as they look. The A30 in particular will be a new benchmark for Class A tone and completely deserves its Gold Award

We dislike: Both amps are weighty beasts and the A30 only has one carry handle. Although it does come with snap-in castors, we really think it should have a pair of handles so two people can carry it with more ease

Guitarist says: Based on these two superb examples, Blackstar is going to be a very hot name in guitar amplification – remember you saw it here first



Blackstar Artisan A15 combo

PRICE: £799
ORIGIN: Designed in the UK, built in Korea
TYPE: All valve, two-channel combo with valve rectification
OUTPUT: Switchable, between 15W push-pull and 5W single-ended
VALVES: 1 x EF86, 3 x ECC83/12AX7 preamp, 2 x EL84 power amp, 1 x EZ81 rectifier
DIMENSIONS: 530 (h) x 620 (w) x 230mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 23/50
CABINET: 18mm ply with dovetailed corners
LOUDSPEAKER: One Celestion G12M 12-inch
CHANNELS: Two, non-switching but linkable with dual high- and low-sensitivity inputs
CONTROLS: Channel 1: volume and tone. Channel 2: volume and tone
FOOTSWITCH: N/A.
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Switchable output power from 15 to five watts, switchable output impedance
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The 2 x 12 A30 combo costs £1,199; the A100 head costs £1,099 with 4 x 12 cabs set to retail at £499
Blackstar Amplification
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Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Blackstar Artisan A30 combo

PRICE: £1,199
ORIGIN: Designed in the UK, built in Korea
TYPE: All valve, two-channel combo with valve rectification.
OUTPUT: Switchable, between 30W push-pull and 10W single-ended
VALVES: 1 x EF86, 3 x ECC83/12AX7 preamp, 4 x EL84 power amp, 1 x GZ34 rectifier
DIMENSIONS: 570 (h) x 710 (w) x 260mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 34/75
CABINET: 18mm ply with dovetailed corners
LOUDSPEAKER: Two Celestion V30 12-inch
CHANNELS: Two, non-switching but linkable with dual high- and low-sensitivity inputs
CONTROLS: Channel 1: volume, tone, bass shape (five-way switch). Channel 2: gain, voice switch (bright + warm), bass mid and treble, volume
FOOTSWITCH: N/A
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Switchable output power from 30 to 10 watts, switchable output impedance
OPTIONS: None



Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★