

## FIRST PLAY



**VOX AC30S1 COMBO**  
£735

**WHAT IS IT?** Single channel, back-to-basics 1x12 version of one of the cornerstones of classic amp tone



**VOX MINI SUPERBEETLE 25 STACK**  
£349

**WHAT IS IT?** Downsized stack with Nutube technology under its hood and speaker-emulated headphones/recording output

# Less Is More

Two lightweight new additions to Vox's class of 2018 that help to celebrate six decades of classic Brit tone

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**T**his year is Vox's 60th birthday, a rare event for any manufacturer and one that underlines Vox's legendary status in the electric guitar universe. As part of the celebrations, we've already been treated to a bevy of stunning new products this year, and here we're looking at two tempting amps that combine cutting-edge technology with vintage style and tone in typical Vox fashion: the AC30S1 combo and the Mini Superbeetle 25 stack.

The AC30S1 is essentially a stripped-down AC30, with a single channel based on the classic Top Boost circuit and a slightly narrower cabinet holding a single 12-inch loudspeaker. The Mini Superbeetle takes











1. The AC30S1 has a momentary action mains power switch linked to an eco-friendly power supply, so no clunks when switching, and the amp can switch itself off if there's no sound for around 15 minutes
2. The AC30S1 keeps it simple with a solitary effects loop and extension speaker outlet on the rear
3. Deceptively simple controls on the AC30S1 access the full spectrum of Top Boost tone, with the chicken-head knobs underlining the vintage vibe

The AC30S1 gives a modern interpretation of the Top Boost tone wrapped up in traditional looks



its inspiration from the 1960s' USA-made Thomas Organ stacks and the British-made AC-100, with a scaled-down Nutube-powered head sat on top of a simplified non-pivoting chrome frame that supports a 1x10-inch Celestion-powered speaker cabinet. As with the MV50 heads we looked at around a year ago, the Mini Superbeetle may look like a toy, but it's more than capable of holding its own with many full-sized amps, producing 25 watts into its dedicated cabinet, and up to 50 watts into a 4 ohm load.

Both amps are dressed in full-on traditional Vox livery, with black basketweave vinyl, brown diamond grill cloth and suitably proportioned gold logo badges, including an authentic vertical trapezoid badge for the Mini Superbeetle's speaker cabinet. Grey-black control panels and chicken-head knobs on the outside of the chassis complete the vintage vibe. However, underneath the vintage looks the electronics are thoroughly modern.

The Mini Superbeetle has a pair of small PCBs for preamp and power stage, with the Nutube sat on a separate daughterboard, making it easy to access in the unlikely event it needs replacing. The Nutube 6P1 is an innovative replacement for the conventional 12AX7 preamp valve, developed by Vox's parent company Korg in association with VFD specialists Noritake Itron. It uses VFD (Vacuum Fluorescent Display) technology, normally used in displays that tell you how fast your microwave curry is cooking. VFDs are interesting because they work almost

identically to valves; they have a cathode, anode and a control grid to switch display sectors on and off. Homebrew enthusiasts have tinkered with VFDs for audio before, however, the Nutube 6P1 is designed for audio and effectively replicates the 12AX7 twin triode's characteristics. The benefits are a much smaller package that looks like a glass integrated circuit, with tiny power consumption and little or no heat, resulting in a much-increased life – Korg quotes in the region of 10,000 hours.

As for controls we get knobs for gain, volume, bass, treble, a level control for the built-in digital reverb and a speed control for the Nutube-powered tremolo. There's also a small standby switch, linked to a ferociously bright blue 'on' LED that's powerful enough to make reading the panel lettering almost impossible.

On the rear panel you'll find a socket for the external laptop-style 19-volt DC power supply, a pair of speaker jacks with an impedance switch and speaker-emulated headphones recording output. A master EQ switch changes the overall response between 'deep' and 'flat' modes, to suit the matching cabinet or larger enclosures, and there's a defeat switch for the Euro-friendly auto power off mode, which turns off the power if no audio is sensed after a pre-set delay.

The AC30S1's internals are similar, just larger. Two main PCBs support most of the electronics including the valve sockets, with a smaller daughter board for the amp's digital reverb effect. Everything is neatly wired up and connected by Molex plugs, making servicing easy if it's needed.





The Mini Superbeetle has a built-in Nutube-powered tremolo circuit for authentic vintage sounds

The semi-closed back cabinet means the valves aren't so easy to get to, but this is the case with many AC30 variants. The combo features a single input, feeding controls for gain, bass, treble, master volume and reverb. There's a simple series effects loop on the rear panel together with an extension speaker outlet, and that's your lot with this 'back to basics' version.

As with the Mini Superbeetle, the AC30S1 has an energy-saving power supply that switches the amp off if no audio is detected for around 15 minutes. Thankfully, there's a small switch to turn this function off. The power toggle switch has been replaced with a momentary action type that operates a relay, which feels a little odd at first, but we quickly got used to it.

Overall, both amps are built to the typically high standards we've come to expect from Vox today: built to last as well as looking great.

## Sounds

We auditioned both amps with a variety of guitars, including a Gibson Custom Shop '63 ES-335, a PAF-loaded Les Paul and our Duncan Alnico Pro-loaded Strat. Like all cathode-biased amps, the AC30S1 takes a little while for its voltages to stabilise. After a few minutes though, initial hum

fades away and the amp is remarkably quiet. The controls are deceptively simple, with a wide range of gain and tone that makes it easy to dial in any guitar. Low gain settings produce slightly boxy mids and a medium-fast attack, evoking many classic pop instrumentals from the 60s, especially when mixed with Vox's digital spring reverb. This effect is excellent and matches many studio effect/plugins for quality, with a range that goes from natural background ambience to full-on cavern. Even with the level control maxed out, the effect doesn't overpower the guitar and works well for authentic 60s guitar sounds. If you pick 'Marvin style', using the bridge pickup of a Strat and holding the trem with your little finger so the pick is roughly over the neck pickup, any decent delay in the AC30S1's effects loop will get you a satisfyingly authentic Shadows sound.

Take the reverb off, add a little more gain and you'll find a perfect Beatles Top Boost jangle, which sounds superb with our ES-335. Pushing up the gain to about halfway takes you into the Blues Invasion era, with a singing sustain and a touch-sensitive toothy attack that compliments any guitar. It's ideal for blues players looking for a slightly more aggressive edge to their tone, compared to the regular

'benchmark' tweed sound. Dimming the gain and tones comes very close to classic Queen, with maybe a touch more gain needed for lower output pickups. The single Celestion VX12 speaker in this near closed-back cabinet produces plenty of volume and bottom end, with a slightly more focused treble when you listen on-axis compared to a 2x12 enclosure.

The Mini Superbeetle might be quite different internally but it sounds surprisingly similar, with slightly less bottom-end, yet still delivering a satisfying crunch, together with volume out of all proportion to its size. The volume comes from the Mini's special Class D output stage, while the clever Nutube 6P1 provides the elusive feel and dynamics of a real valve, because it is one. The Nutube is also used for the Mini Superbeetle's sweet-sounding tremolo effect, which adds considerably to the stack's vintage vibe.

A single 10-inch loudspeaker taking 25 watts is more than enough for home use, while connecting the Superbeetle to a pair of 8 ohm cabinets will allow the amp to deliver its full 50-watt output. The EQ switch on the rear panel is handy when using the head with other cabinets, taming the boosted bass response for a tight and very contemporary tone.



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4. The Mini Superbeetle has a speaker-emulated headphones socket that doubles as an excellent low-noise recording outlet

It's great fun to use, especially when you watch other people's response to hearing it for the first time: any expectations that it's a toy are quickly dispelled. The Mini is also a class act going into a recording desk, with very low noise from its speaker-emulated headphones output and the same quality digital reverb as the AC30S1, saving you one aux send or the processing power of a good reverb plugin.

### Verdict

Vox was originally built on innovation and over the last 25 years that pioneering spirit has continued to flourish under Korg's ownership, allowing the brand to achieve its true potential as one of the world's top musical instrument brands.

Both these new amps are perfect examples of that. The Mini Superbeetle 25 is a great recording tool as well as being ideal for home practice, while its cool vintage looks make it a unique conversation piece for any man cave. The blue 'on' LED needs to be toned down somewhat, and it would be nice if there was a strain relief hook for the DC power lead, but this is really all we can whinge about.

The AC30S1? It's an ideal no-frills AC30 for players after a modern interpretation of the Top Boost tone wrapped up in traditional looks. It's certainly more portable than 2x12 versions, without sacrificing anything significant in terms of tone or volume. Despite its simplicity, the sounds are very versatile and well-suited for 60s, indie, classic rock, blues, country... and much more.

So, two more great amps in Vox's catalogue and two more niches effectively – and very temptingly – filled. **G**



### VOX AC30S1 COMBO

**PRICE:** £735

**ORIGIN:** Vietnam

**TYPE:** Valve preamp, digital reverb and valve power amp

**OUTPUT:** 30 watts rms.

**VALVES:** 2x 12AX7, 4x EL84

**DIMENSIONS:** 658 (h) x 550 (w) x 265mm (d)

**WEIGHT (KG/LB):** 24.5/54

**CABINET:** Ply

**LOUDSPEAKERS:** One Celestion Custom VX12

**CHANNELS:** One

**CONTROLS:** Gain, Volume, Bass, Treble, Reverb level

**FOOTSWITCH:** None

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Series effects loop, extension speaker outlet

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** None

**Vox Amplification**

**01908 304600**

**[www.voxamps.com](http://www.voxamps.com)**

# 8/10

**PROS** More portable than a 2x12 AC30, without sacrificing too much volume or tone

**CONS** It would be nice if the loop was footswitchable



### VOX MINI SUPERBEETLE 25 STACK

**PRICE:** £349

**ORIGIN:** Vietnam

**TYPE:** Valve preamp, digital reverb and solid-state power amp.

**OUTPUT:** 25 watts rms into 8 ohms, max 50 watts rms into 4 ohms

**VALVES:** 1x Nutube 6P1

**DIMENSIONS:** 323 (w) x 596 (h) x 180mm (h)

**WEIGHT (KG/LB):** 9/20

**CABINET:** Ply/mdf

**CHANNELS:** One

**CONTROLS:** Gain, Volume, Bass, Treble, Tremolo, Reverb level, EQ Fat/Deep, Eco on/off, switchable output impedance

**FOOTSWITCH:** None

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Two speaker outlet, speaker-emulated headphones/recording out

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** None

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**PROS** Compact, good-looking and great tone you'd expect from this British institution

**CONS** Over-bright mains LED, and no strain relief for power cable