

TONEFUL TAG-TEAM

VVT's Lindy Fralin Model amplifier

Maryland-based amplifier builder Vintage Vacuum Tube Amplifiers (you may know it as VVT) recently fielded a request from renowned pickup winder Lindy Fralin. He wasn't looking for advice on wire or how hot to wind a pickup for best interaction with a particular VVT; rather, Fralin wanted an amp built to his specs and taste. And not just for him, but for the mass market. VVT, realizing the co-branding possibilities, jumped at the opportunity.

So, what does a tone guru like Fralin want in an amplifier? Well, he says the goal was "a clean, full-body-voiced amp that's lightweight and able to sound good at low volume." Sounds like something we'd like, too. So when VVT asked whether we wanted to hear it, we were happy to take up the offer.

At first glance, the VVT Lindy Fralin amp looks boutique in a way we've come to expect; i.e. it sports point-to-point wiring with carbon-comp resistors, an all-tube circuit, and a 12AX7-driven spring reverb and preamp. *But*, go deeper and you'll quickly discover some seldom-seen features, like a trick self-biasing-cathode design that allows the player to switch between a pair of 6L6s (for 30 watt of output) and a pair of 6V6s (for 15-watts) without having to re-bias the amp. Part of its secret is a custom-wound Mercury Magnetics transformer designed specifically for the Fralin that allows the amp to switch between the 6L6s and 6V6s while maintaining stable impedance for the tubes and speaker load.

The amp ships with a pair of 6L6s, but will also accept 5881s or JJ 6V6s, for an altogether different favor. Another unique feature is Fralin's choice of a single 15" alnico-magnet Weber speaker instead of the more traditional pair of 10" or single 12" speaker.

The overall look and layout of the amp is different, as well, but still boasts a vintage vibe with a neatly executed off-white tolex, oxblood grillecloth, top-mounted controls, and heavy-duty

leather handle. There are no metal or plastic corner protectors, and no extraneous piping or badging. Its look is clean, simple, and classic. The control layout is accordingly succinct, with a single $\frac{1}{4}$ " input, a switch for Bright, and controls for Volume, Treble, Bass and Reverb, along with switches for Power and Standby. Also worthy of mention is the 11-foot power cord.

VVT shipped our tester with a matched pair of 6L6s by TAD and a matched pair of 6V6s by JJ. We started with the TAD 6L6s and our test guitars—a Fender Relic Strat and a Hofner Verythin Classic with mini-humbuckers. After plugging in the Relic Strat and letting the amp warm up, we set the Volume at 3 o'clock, Bass and Treble at 12, and then we hammered a few chords.

We were immediately impressed with the amp's complex overtones, its round, punchy low-end response, and its snappy highs. It didn't take much noodling or knob tweaking to realize that the tone controls on this amp, along with its Bright switch, are exceedingly well-voiced. From a player's perspective, that means it's easy to find likeable sounds. The Bright switch compensates nicely for the slightly darker sound of mini- or full-size humbuckers, while the wide sweep of the Bass control keeps its frequencies full and punchy with single-coils.

While the amp is voiced for clean tones, it also does a good job when it comes time to get dirty, and is very responsive to changes in pick attack or guitar output. Simply backing down the volume control on the guitar and easing up on our pick attack, the Fralin cleaned up from moderately dirty overdrive with musical overtones to a sparkling clean sound that didn't lose any of its life or attitude.

We popped in the matched set of JJ 6V6s and checked the tone at 15 watts output. The amp broke up quickly and had a slightly more boxy sound, with reduced complexity of overtones; still very lively and punchy, just not as big as 6L6s—fantastic for low-volume situations. The tube-driven reverb is also well-voiced. At lower settings, it adds a bit of ambience that doesn't get in the way or wash out the amp's tone, and at higher settings it's suitably splashy.

The boys at Vintage Vacuum Tube do a killer job on the Fralin signature amp. It's loaded with big, dynamic, single-coil-friendly tone (that sounds pretty good with humbuckers, too!) in a nice, lightweight package. —Phil Feser

Price: \$1,799 (retail).

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