

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

GBINFO

Barnett Davies
AMPLIFICATION

**BARNETT
DAVIES FIFTEEN
THIRTY**

PRICE: £1,595

BUILT IN: UK

TYPE: All-valve 1x12
combo

POWER: 15/30 watts
Class-AB

VALUES: 3 x 12AR7,
2 x 12AT7, 4 x EL84

FEATURES: Clean channel
with volume control,
overdrive channel with
gain and volume controls,
channel select/combine
switch, bass, mid & treble
EQ controls, reverb
control, short-tank spring
reverb, 15/30 watts
power switch, 1 x 8-ohm
speaker output, balanced
XLR DI output with dummy
load & speaker emulation,
DI cut level control,
padded cover included

SPEAKER: 1 x 12-inch
Celestion G12 Century
neodymium-magnet
speaker

FOOTSWITCH: 3-button
footswitch included
(channel select, reverb,
channel combine)

DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x
465(h) x 250(d) mm (max,
with handle & controls)

WEIGHT: 13.5kg (29.8lbs)

OPTIONS: Natural wood
finish, Celestion G12
Century Vintage speaker
(no extra charge)

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DAVID GREEVES ASSESSES A LIGHTWEIGHT,
NO-NONSENSE PROFESSIONAL AMP FOR THE
STUDIO AND THE STAGE, HAND-BUILT IN THE UK

When Dave Barnett and Clive Davies put their heads together to design a new amp, their remit was simple: build a high-quality valve amp that's small, light and portable, loud enough for gigs and flexible enough for recording, all without compromising on tone. Hang on just a minute – that's not simple at all. That's impossible... Isn't it?

Not in the least, according to Barnett and Davies, who build nothing but this amp in their workshop in Battle, near Hastings on the south coast of England. In designing the Fifteen Thirty, they've tried to create an amp that puts the musician's needs first (particularly those of us who hate carrying heavy equipment), starting with a blank slate rather than getting caught up in the standard conventions of amp design. But aren't those conventions there for a reason? Why don't we find out what this little baby can do now that the bath water is gone.

PRE & POWER AMP

The Fifteen Thirty is based around a quartet of EL84 valves. All four are used when the amp is in 30-watt mode, and two are switched out when the amp is in 15-watt mode. This sort of "half-power" facility has become

increasingly popular over the last few years, thanks to the vogue for lower-powered valve amps. We use the term "half-power" carefully though – as many of you will already know, half the watts doesn't mean half the volume. What you actually get is a bit less overall volume and the ability to drive the amp into power-tube distortion at a lower level. But 15 watts of Class-AB valve power is by no means quiet.

Not unlike Laney's Lionheart L20H head, another EL84-based amp that's coincidentally also reviewed this month (see page 76), the Fifteen Thirty has a clean channel with just a volume control, an overdrive channel with gain and master volume controls, and EQ and reverb controls common to both channels. Where it differs from the Lionheart, and indeed most amps, is that it's possible to combine the clean and overdrive channels, so you can add some clean definition to your distorted sound or some dirt to your clean tone. This is accomplished simply by setting the channel-select rocker switch between the clean volume knob and the overdrive gain knob to its centre position.

Leave it like this, and you can switch the combine function on and off using the included three-button footswitch, which also lets you move between the clean and overdrive

channels and switch reverb on and off. Sensibly, the reverb switch is positioned in the middle so that you can step on it at the same time as either switching channels or activating the combine function.

The control panel is intentionally angled back so that you can see what's what even when standing directly over the amp. It's very clear in terms of layout, though the plastic knobs and switches do lend the amp something of a home-made quality. That's not necessarily a bad thing if you like your gear boutiquey and hand-built – one plain-speaking visitor to the GB offices took one look at the Fifteen Thirty and said, "That's either really cheap or really expensive," and we know exactly what he means.

We've no doubt that the Barnett Davies combo is built to stand up to the rigours of the road, however. The guts of the amp are housed in a welded aluminium chassis designed to be easily accessible for repairs and servicing. The valves and transformers are mounted on the chassis itself, while the rest of the components are hand-wired together on a fibreglass eyelet board. Were this not all reassuring enough, there's a three-year warranty covering all parts and labour (excluding the valves, that is).

Barnett and Davies have taken great care to design the Fifteen Thirty's

BARNETT DAVIES FIFTEEN THIRTY



Barnett Davies
AMPLIFICATION

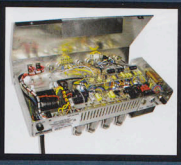
CLASSY CHASSIS

A LOOK INSIDE THE FIFTEEN THIRTY

■ The Barnett Davies Fifteen Thirty is built by hand to a very high standard.

The amp's chassis is essentially an aluminium box, hinged at the front to allow easy access for repairs and servicing. All of the components are wired together on fibreglass eyelet boards, so should any individual resistor or capacitor fail, replacing it will be cheap and simple. Messrs Barnett and Davies must have used the engineering equivalent

of a shoehorn to fit all of the amp's circuitry into such a compact box, and this neat and tidy display of hand-wiring is a joy to behold.



circuitry with high-quality sound (and low noise) in mind. There are no transistors or integrated circuits anywhere inside, and everything runs off the valves, including the reverb.

At the rear of the amp, you'll find the 15-/30-watt switch, squeezed in between the 8-ohm speaker output socket and the XLR DI output. The amp has an in-built dummy load so you can unplug the internal speaker and use the DI out without damaging the amp. This output has its own level control and is frequency-compensated to simulate the sonic signature of a

guitar speaker – a very useful feature for sound reinforcement on stage or recording on the quiet.

CABINET & SPEAKER

The Fifteen Thirty's cabinet is made from solid pine (rather than plywood, which is more common), with comb-joined corners. It's fitted with metal corner protectors and covered with black textured vinyl, though you can opt for a natural wood finish at no extra charge. The chassis is securely attached to the cabinet, with the short-tank spring reverb mounted down one side and just enough space to store the mains lead, footswitch and cable inside when on the move.

To help reduce weight, the Fifteen Thirty is fitted with a 12-inch Celestion G12 Century speaker, which uses a neodymium magnet. Neodymium is a rare earth metal which lets you achieve the same magnetic pull as a ceramic magnetic from a much smaller mass, resulting in a drastically lighter speaker – compare the G12's weight of 2kg to the Vintage 30's 4.7kg. Celestion's 'vintage-voiced' alternative, the G12 Century Vintage, last seen in the Torres Bassman 5F6 we reviewed in issue 70, is available at no extra cost.

In addition to employing a lighter speaker and transformers, the designers have taken care to arrange the components so that the weight is evenly distributed and the amp is well balanced and comfortable to carry. It's this extra

level of thought that makes us warm to the Barnett Davies amp. It's a really compact package, and it feels like Mr Barnett and Mr Davies have used all of their ingenuity to pack in as much as they possibly can.

SOUNDS

The first thing that strikes us about the Fifteen Thirty on powering it up is how quiet it is. Not in terms of volume – at 15 or 30 watts, there's plenty of that – but in terms of background noise. Only when you ramp up the gain at high volumes on the overdrive channel do you notice some background noise. This gives the Fifteen Thirty a real advantage in the studio, and fills us with confidence about the quality of its construction and design.

The clean channel presents you with a corking clear tone that's bright and responsive to your playing. Jazz and country players alike will really love it, with or without a dollop of lush tube-driven spring reverb. As you turn the volume knob past 12 o'clock there's a noticeable extra kick of gain that's a bit surprising if you're expecting a totally smooth and linear increase. The clean channel begins to overdrive past this point. It's a bright, slightly fuzzy distortion that's slightly reminiscent of some of Fender's smaller 6V6-powered amps, like the Princeton and Deluxe Reverb.

The overdrive channel lets you pile on more gain, just as you'd expect. Using the channel combine function, you can make use of the clean channel at the same time. This serves to fill out the overdriven sound and adds some more definition. We're tempted to leave the channels



■ Set the three-position channel select switch to its middle position to combine clean and overdrive channels



DETAILS

BRIGHT, LIGHT AND LOUD. THIS IS JUST THE THING FOR GIGS OR RECORDING



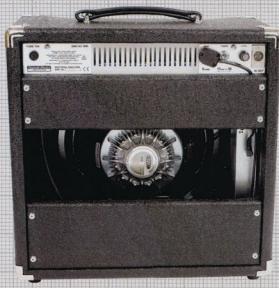
■ You can operate the nifty channel combine function using the included footswitch



■ The neodymium magnet in the speaker helps keep the amp's weight down to 13.5kg



■ The 15-30-mast switch is around the back, beside the speaker-emulating DI out



GBOPINION

BARNETT DAVIES FIFTEEN THIRTY

GOLD STARS

- ★ High build quality
- ★ Very light and portable
- ★ Super clean sounds

BLACK MARKS

- The overdrive may be a touch too bright for some tastes

IDEAL FOR...

Serious gigging and recording guitarists

combined and turned up all the time, so we can make use of one of the Fifteen Thirty's most attractive qualities – its ability to clean up when you turn the volume on the guitar down. This is something we talk about a lot in these pages, but trust us when we say that the Fifteen Thirty is pretty special in this respect. Twinned with a good guitar (we used a PRS Singlecut Standard Satin, a Fender Telecaster and a Gibson Les Paul Classic) it's possible to go from full drive to fully clean via all points in between just from the guitar's volume, and the amp never sounds dull or under-powered.

The Fifteen Thirty's basic sound is very bright. This is great news for darker-sounding guitars like the Les Paul – the amp offers brilliant definition and a lively, snappy dynamic response – but can be a bit much when the Tele is turned up loud, even with the treble control backed all the way off. This may have a bit to do with the neodymium speaker, but plugging the amp into a separate 2x12 cab reveals that the amp itself is indeed very bright-sounding. It is possible to calm things down by backing off the tone knob on the

guitar, which can help you reach a smoother saturated overdrive sound, but if dark, fat driven tones are your bag this amp may not be for you. Perhaps a conventional presence control would help, letting you filter out those highest of high frequencies that can get a bit edgy.

Flipping between 15 and 30 watts provides only a subtle change in tone. There's only slightly less volume at 15 watts and not much more clean headroom. The sound also feels slightly thinner to us – we found ourselves leaving the switch set to 30 the whole time. This little amp is very loud though, and will happily hold its own in a full band setting, which is no mean feat for such a small and light combo. At the highest levels, however, the cabinet does rattle a little.

GBRATINGS

BARNETT DAVIES FIFTEEN THIRTY

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| BUILD QUALITY | ★★★★ |
| FEATURES | ★★★★ |
| SOUNDS | ★★★★ |
| VALUE FOR MONEY | ★★★★ |
| GBVERDICT | ★★★★ |

GBCONCLUSION

PUKKA, PORTABLE AND PROFESSIONAL

■ The Barnett Davies Fifteen Thirty is a brilliant idea, skilfully realised. It's light as a feather yet provides a range of top-quality sounds at this an admirably low noise floor and a high standard of construction and you've got a cracking little amp.

It's exceptionally easy to use, and additional features like the channel combine switch and speaker-emulating DI output enhance the whole package without getting in the way. It's also respectably priced, considering that it's made by hand in very small numbers. On the downside, the cosmetics (or lack thereof) may put some people off, and the bright, edgy distortion sound will not please everyone. But pro and semi-pro guitarists who need good clean and dirty sounds that are dependable and highly controllable will see the benefits of the Barnett Davies amp straight away. **GB**