





# JPF Amplification

## Sir Charles 15 combo

This new UK-built valve combo combines cool elements of vintage Gibson and Ampeg amplifiers with some very original thinking – and it looks fabulous as well. Review by **Richard Purvis**

**A**n amplifier, as you've probably noticed by now, is a big wooden box with some knobs at the top. It's hard to make such an object seductive, at least in the same way that guitar makers can set the player's trousers a-twitch with sleek curves, shiny lacquer and the graspability of a perfectly sanded neck. This little combo, though, is the closest thing to sexy amplification that you're ever likely to see. The angular two-tone vinyl, the subtle gold piping, the white-on-black chickenheads... you can even specify the colour scheme of your choice. And if you like the look of the outside, wait until you see what's going on beneath the control panel.

The man in charge of JPF is Frank Cooke, a London-based tech with years of experience repairing backline of all vintages at Angel Music on Denmark Street. He thought it would be cool to use his knowledge of just about every valve amp ever made to create something new... and here we are. The idea was to design and build all-British, hand-wired amps with high-quality components and not too many of them, keeping the signal path as short and clean as possible for optimum tone. What JPF didn't want to do was copy a Fender 5E3, a Vox AC15 or any other vintage template – they started with a



JPF make their own custom-engraved control panels

### JPF didn't copy a Fender or a Vox – they started with a blank page, drew a pair of output valves and took it from there

blank page, drew a pair of output valves and took it from there. Working around EL34s led to the King Charles 30, while 6V6s spawned what became the Sir Charles 15. Both were launched in head form, with a fetching 'go-faster stripe'; now, thanks to the carpentry and covering skills of London neighbours Zilla Cabs, the 15-watter is also available as a combo.

So what is it? Well, we're looking at a fixed-bias design with no negative feedback loop, a tonestack based on the rare 1950s Gibson GA-70, solid-state rectification and an unusual 'see-saw' phase inverter design borrowed from the original Ampeg Portaflex. There are no controls apart from Volume, Bass and Treble, and the speaker is an Alnico Tayden Ace 25. Taydens are British- ➤

### FACTFILE

#### SIR CHARLES 15 COMBO

**DESCRIPTION** 15W combo with 2 x ECC803S and 2 x 6V6, Tayden Ace 25 speaker. Made in UK  
**RRP** £1,100 (£1,000 with ceramic speaker)

**CONTROL PANEL** Bass, Treble, Volume; standby and on/off switches

**REAR PANEL** 2 x 8 ohm and 1 x 16 ohm speaker outputs; bias test points

**DIMENSIONS** 61cm wide, 51cm high, 24cm deep  
**WEIGHT** 20kg/44lbs

**CONTACT** Angel Music  
020 7836 8008  
[www.jpamps.com](http://www.jpamps.com)

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**Volt**  
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Another 6V6-driven Brit boutique combo, offering ultra-pure overdriven tones in the Dumble style  
RRP **£1,499**  
REVIEWED **June 2011**

**LazyJ**  
20 Combo  
Handbuilt in the UK under the influence of the iconic tweed Fender 5E3 Deluxe, with a Celestion Blue pushing the air  
RRP **£1,249**  
REVIEWED **May 2010**

**Louis Electric**  
Buster  
Awesome-sounding Deluxe-type with a Celestion G12H, and 6L6s hiking the power output up to 25W  
RRP **£1,550**  
REVIEWED **July 2011**

made units based on classic designs of the '60s and '70s; this one looks a lot like a Celestion Blue (except that it's green), and that's no coincidence - it's been voiced to mimic the speakers fitted to early Voxes.

The JJ power valves hang sideways towards the front of the amp but are firmly held by sprung brackets, while the two shielded preamp tubes are also JJs... but they're not ECC83s. Well, not exactly. JPF has chosen a variant known as the ECC803S, which is renowned for its warm tone but is generally not used in combos because of its susceptibility to microphonics. Frank believes this should not be problem in a 15W amp; if he's wrong, they're easily swapped out for standard ECC83s.

Inside the aluminium chassis we find an eyelet board made of 3mm-thick Teflon. The wiring is neat and uncluttered, and most of the resistors in the middle section of the board wear the telltale dark brown jackets of the carbon comp types worshipped by some vintage tone purists. On the bottom panel are a pair of output bias testing points - the adjustment pot is right next to the big tubes and, in theory, can be accessed without taking the chassis out of the cab. This might be awkward, but it's still quicker - and safer - than having to delve right into the circuitry.

**Sounds**

Welcome to America. The Sir Charles may be made right here in the UK but even at clean levels those 6V6s are quick to make their Fender heritage heard. It's a tight, snappy and distinctly tweed-like sound with a full bottom end and the merest hint of British chime thrown in. There's a moderate amount of background hiss, but the signal-to-noise ratio does seem to improve as you push the volume towards break-up point. With a Telecaster this doesn't come much sooner than two o'clock on



The JPF has 6V6 output tubes and a pair of unusual ECC803S preamp valves

**The JPF is tight and snappy with a full bottom end, and the overdrive gets seriously rich and gravelly**

the volume, at which point chords begin to turn pleasingly gritty and single notes take on a sweet, sticky, elastic character that would bring a smile to the face of a sulking nun. A Les Paul reaches similar saturation levels a couple of notches earlier; again it's all about creamy goodness, but you do lose a little in the way of dynamics with the fatter output of humbuckers.

The overdrive gets seriously rich and gravelly towards the top of the dial, and this thing is capable of some pretty extreme aggression at full blast. Fair play to those ECC803S valves for behaving themselves impeccably in the middle of that maelstrom, and to the Tayden for holding things together so well at the low end. The tone controls will not turn Hula Hoops into Monster Munch but they do their job and they are interactive - with Treble around halfway, pushing the Bass towards three o'clock results in a slight damping down of the mids, a potentially handy tone-sculpting feature.

There is one piece of design that isn't quite so handy, however. The way the Sir Charles is laid out, you can peek through the ventilation grille and get a clear view of the speaker - so if the amp is lower than head height and you're standing anywhere near it, you hear almost as much sound coming through there as you do through the basketweave at the front. This won't be an issue for gig audiences, or studio mics, but if you get a chance to try one of these amps out, do your knob-tweaking then stand well back and keep your ears in the firing line to find out what it actually sounds like.

**Verdict**

The theory behind this amp will appeal to a lot of players - with 60-odd years of valve amp innovation to plunder, why limit yourself to the influence of one model? Combine that kind of magpie thinking with an old-fashioned commitment to hand-wired quality and simplicity, and you've surely got a recipe for something special. For single-coil-slinging blues and country players in particular, the good news is that the Sir Charles 15 combo has the tone to match the theory. And you've got to admit it is damned sexy.



You can save £100 by going for a ceramic magnet speaker - but we wouldn't

**FINAL SCORE**

JPF SIR CHARLES 15 COMBO	
<b>Build Quality</b>	<b>19/20</b>
<b>Playability</b>	<b>16/20</b>
<b>Sound</b>	<b>19/20</b>
<b>Value for money</b>	<b>18/20</b>
<b>Looks</b>	<b>20/20</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>92%</b>