



Acoustic Tube Treasure

The Humphrey Espresso 15

Now for something completely different: a swank, boutique tube amp designed specifically for acoustic guitars and archtops. While the Humphrey Espresso 15 may look like a high-end curiosity, the venerable David Gilmour has one, so there must be something hip and interesting going on here.

The Espresso 15 has striking looks, mixing Art-Deco curves with the overall feel of a vintage tube radio or '50s record player, especially thanks to that gold/brown grille cloth. Upping the cool factor is the window pane on the right, allowing the guitarist to see tubes glowing and imparting their silky tube tone. The cabinet is built from a 3/4" hardwood of the buyer's choice (such as alder, ash, oak, soft maple, willow, walnut, or even more exotic woods). Our test model was made of dark, chocolate-colored wenge wood. The cab was immaculately assembled with dovetail joints, while the internal-speaker baffle and back panel is made from 3/4" 14-ply Baltic birch. A genuine leather handle adds to the amp's retro-luxury feel.

Inside the chassis, look for an all-tube signal path that uses matched and balanced JJ-Electronic tubes. This 15-watter is fitted with two EL84 power tubes, a pair of 12AU7 preamp tubes, and a 5Y3GT rectifier. Its speaker is a 10-inch Eminence with a high-power horn/tweeter for reproducing the high frequencies. There are also side-firing ports to help fill out the acoustic sound. Other hand-wired goodies include silver-coated, solid-core copper wiring with Teflon insulation and silver-bearing solder for a clean signal path.

Also look for sturdy circuit board and turret construction built to military specs. On our test model, there was an optional XLR out jack to send the signal to a P.A. or cab. Further options include a second channel, a stand, and accompanying speaker cabinet—see the Humphrey website for pricing.

As you might expect on an elegant

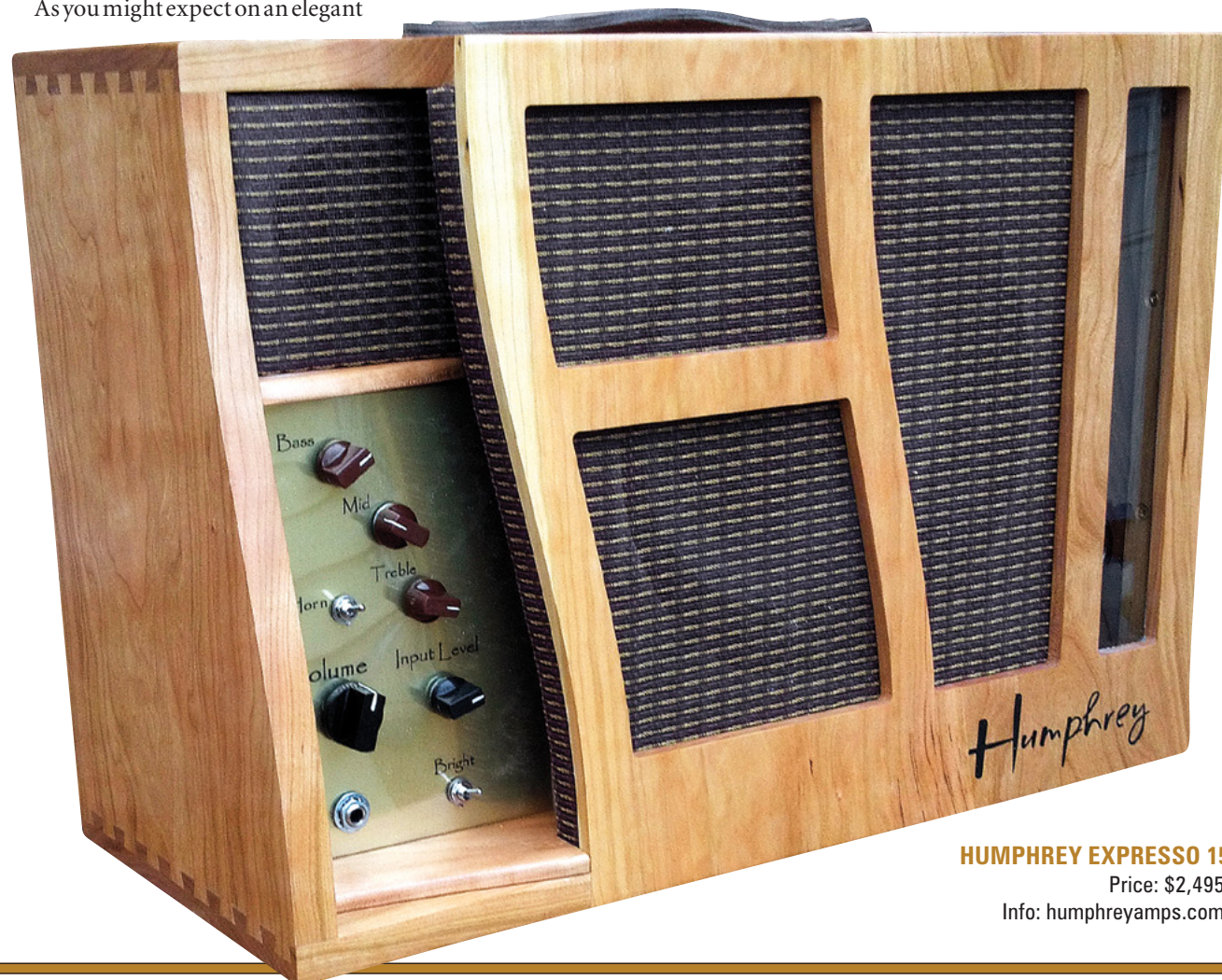
tube machine, the layout is very simple. A small on/off switch is located on the AC panel in the rear and might take you a second to locate. There's no Standby switch—just turn the Espresso 15 on and wait for the tubes to warm up. The controls include a three-band EQ, plus Volume and Input Level (the latter to help prevent distortion), as well as a Bright switch and another switch to turn the horn on and off, a handy tool that we'll explain later.

Starting out with a 12-string acoustic with an internal pickup, the Humphrey showed its true nature right off—transparency. While you can get acoustic amps with plenty of bells and whistles (reverb, digital effects, compression, etc.), the Espresso 15 provides just a few controls, but they effortlessly make the natural sound of your acoustic simply louder. There's very little, if any tonal coloring, and as a result, you won't miss any of those fancy bells 'n' whistles. The amp made this acoustic

12-string sound full and lush, creating a great aural experience. Experiment with the tone knobs and Bright switch, as well—they're subtle, as those on a good tube amp should be.

Grabbing an ES-175, we turned off the Horn switch and let the 10" Eminence speaker do the work. Adjusting the tone knobs on the guitar and amp allowed for some sweet jazz tones, again, very earthy and natural. If you need a little reverb or chorus, feel free to put a stompbox in the front, but honestly, we didn't miss the sweeteners.

The Espresso's only debits are its weight, thanks mostly to quality components, but it is heavy, ranging from 36 to 40 pounds. However, you likely won't be hauling this amp around anyway—it's more of a studio or home amp. Its cool, tilt-back design also suggests the possibility that one could tip it over, but if you have it near a wall, that won't be a problem; it's just something to keep in mind. — *Pete Prown VG*



HUMPHREY EXPRESSO 15

Price: \$2,495.

Info: humphreyamps.com.