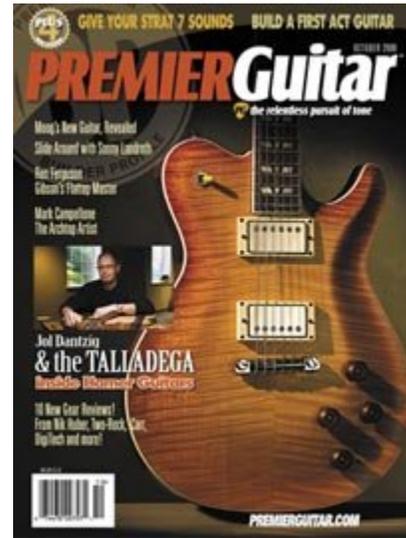


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Carr Raleigh Review

James Egoft



Nearly every obsessive human trait is on display when it comes to guitarists and their gear. Some guys – the “collectors” – need to have at least one of everything, whether it’s custom color pre-CBS Strats or obscure overdrive pedals. Others – the “fans” – spend years tracking down the exact gear of their favorite guitarist, as evidenced in the early-eighties by the scads of Van Halen aficionados scouring electronic surplus stores for

Variacs.

My unique obsession usually manifests itself through a need to understand the motivation behind a riff, lyric or design choice – the “geek” archetype. For example, I wondered where Clapton found the inspiration for his around-the-beat trademark “Layla” riff when he had previously relied on fairly straightforward fare. When I found out Duane Allman was responsible, the wrap-around riff suddenly made sense. Likewise, when I read the press release for Steve Carr’s new 3-watt Raleigh, I wondered if this was intended to be a pared-down addition to the Mercury line or an altogether new concept.

It turns out that the Raleigh – while retaining Carr’s signature mids and bloom – is perhaps the most singularly focused amp in their current lineup. Although comparisons to their Mercury series are inevitable due to similar power and size specs, the Raleigh distances itself from its slightly larger and more powerful stablemates by eschewing the need to ever leave the bedroom or recording studio. With that out of the way, 3 watts with no option for attenuation makes perfect sense – there’s plenty of juice for bold, blooming cleans without ever once shaking the rafters. For those times when melted down distortion is needed, the Raleigh offers up a switchable master volume circuit.

Small, low-wattage amps have always been a boon in studio situations by delivering pushed tones (making the power amp section sweat a little bit, even when clean) at lower SPLs, allowing the use of large-diaphragm tube condenser mics without fear. For example, both Duane and Eric are alleged to have tracked the aforementioned “Layla” riffs through a tweed Champ, likely mic’ed with some vintage Bavarian goodness. The smaller speakers also allow for more desirable mic placement options when taking respective diaphragm sizes and soundwave lengths into consideration.

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On paper, the specs on the Raleigh would suggest a tweed Champ/ blackface Princeton influence: a 10” Eminence Lil’ Buddy; single-ended, 3-watt output; a single input jack; and a simple, no-standby on-off switch. Its tube compliment – two 12AX7s (an Electro-Harmonix and a Groove Tubes in our example) and a single Electro-Harmonix EL84 – is where the Raleigh starts forging its own path. Other typical Carr touches include a thick and thirsty Carr-branded speaker cable, the ubiquitous medical-grade AC plug and what looks to be a bulletproof handle design. The controls are top mounted and keep things simple with a Volume knob, Tone knob, Gain/Master switch and Master Volume knob.



The chassis design itself is unique with the tubes mounted on the side and the Mercury Magnetic transformers on the bottom, residing with the bias trim pot and DMM probe points. The cabinet has a port-like cutout in the bottom allowing easy access to everything, while an abbreviated L-shaped window up above helps the tubes to stay cool. Our green tolex example arrived with lightly flamed maple inserts on the front, which, combined with the asymmetrical, wrap-around speaker grill, give the amp a handsome look suitable for nearly any living room or recording studio décor – hey, at this price range, this kinda thing is important. If you tout form over function, Carr offers nonsense, all-black tolex trim for \$250 less.

Plugged In

Once we plugged in with the master circuit switched out, it became apparent that the Raleigh isn't really going for a 6V6 Champ/Princeton-vibe, but instead a more 6V6/6L6-type of tone and feel – inbetween a blackface Deluxe and maybe a Vibrolux or Pro. The only time the Raleigh is easily identified as an EL84 powered amp is when fiddling with the tone control. With single-coils the amp was perfect with the Tone control just shy of noon; much higher and the amp sounded too bright, although it might be useful to cut through a mid-heavy mix. Starting with a trusty Tele – and the master still disengaged – the Volume control was placed at nine o'clock, which delivered a dynamic, sparkly, multi-dimensional clean tone with just a hint of compression, effortless sustain and the start of Carr's trademark mids. A soft touch here delivered delicate tones while digging in offered more chime up top with just a hint of breakup on the low E and A strings. This setting probably best displayed the Raleigh's EL84 roots. Rolling the Volume up to around 10:30 is where the amp – particularly the lowend – became more Fender-y. It gave up some of the right hand dynamics of the lower setting as well as the top-end chime, replacing them with big, bold "large amp" tones a la Don Rich through Buck's magic Bassman. The breakup was actually a bit less here – it's not until the Volume reaches noon and above when the Raleigh starts to offer a little breakup while still being identified as clean until around three o'clock. From there on the amp's honky midrange is accentuated, giving all notes an overdriven edge – think dimed blackface Princeton with that fat Carr midrange replacing the sweating Fender's – a Les Paul with a BurstBucker III at the bridge loved this setting. The Lil' Buddy really started to make itself aware here too, offering just the right amount of coloration for this amp. This setting would be perfect for blues and roots rock tones or anything else needing both primitive authority and definition. Engaging the Gain/Master switch is like Dr. Jekyll taking a swig of his potion; all of a sudden the amp that was almost encouraging you to turn down suddenly wants to skateboard down to the corner store to pick up another bottle of Night Train after insisting you show it where you've hidden the spray paint.

Starting with the Volume at 9:00 and the Master at 11:00, the Raleigh sounded a tad boxy when just farting around, but positively huge on mic. Rolling in more dirt – Volume and Master both at noon – took the amp from classic rock/modern country crunch to a more saturated, British sound, belying its EL84 roots and instead sounding like a much larger, EL34-powered rig. Throughout the amp’s distorted range, complex two and three-note voicings retained each note’s identity while barre chords melted deliciously into single, authoritative jabs. Diming both the Volume and Master – what I affectionately call “hillbilly-style” – resulted in a fat, saturated Billy G./Warren Hayes warmth, even with a Tele. Grabbing a Les Paul at this point delivered just what you would expect – even juicier mids and additional warmth. Surprisingly, even with all of this saturation going on, the amp seemed determined not to get mushy. Providing these kinds of tones at honest, conversational volume levels is nothing short of amazing.

The Final Mojo

The Raleigh took whatever we threw at it – single-coils, humbuckers, P-90s – and spit back inspiring cleans, complex overdriven tones and raucous dirt with nothing more than a knob tweak or two. In other words, the Raleigh is nearly perfect for recording or truly enjoyable living room jams. The price of admission isn’t cheap, but if you want a nice little amp for your Murphy R9 or DeTemple, or you find yourself needing another high-quality tool for the studio, the price shouldn’t make you balk.

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