

# Sportsman guitar amp

by Carr Amplifiers

REVIEWED BY ALEX MAIOLO · FEB. 6, 2013

\$2190.00 MSRP

As PAs get better and more people record at home, classic, lower wattage amps are gaining in popularity - and thus becoming more expensive. Anyone who has priced even a Silverface Champ lately knows the days of getting a deal are gone.

To meet this demand, companies as diverse as Orange, Vox, and Epiphone have released affordable tube amplifiers, some of which run at as little as 1/4 watt. Naturally, the boutique amp builders are on this too. Many have produced models that are both stage and studio friendly. Pittsboro, NC's Carr Amplifiers is one of them.

Steve Carr has been producing hand-built amps for almost 15 years, which makes him a pioneer in the boutique world. His latest addition, the *Sportsman*, is another triumph in a long history of wins. It comfortably occupies the same space as the lower-wattage Fenders, such as the Princeton and Deluxe, where enough volume meets a size and weight that will keep your back healthy. However, that's just reference point, because the *Sportsman* offers much more. Even without switching on the power, it's clear that the cabinet and, upon looking inside, the wiring, are leagues ahead of the amps Carr used as inspiration.

The styling is unique and may not be to everyone's taste. With Fender being the ultimate American brand, and amp names like Princeton and Harvard evoking Ivy League imagery, perhaps it was just a short leap to the LL Bean-esque name, complete with flying duck logo? I liked the simple layout (tone controls, volume, headroom, reverb), white faceplate, and chicken-head knobs. Typical of Carr, its design references the past but looks modern all the same time.

Once the power is on, other features, such as the Mid and Headroom controls, show what they can do. The former needs no description. The latter is similar to a master volume. More specifically, it controls the relationship between the preamp and power amp. Depending on where the headroom is set, the Volume will break up early or keep things relatively clean as things get louder. I loved this feature because it allowed me to get the same sound at lower recording levels and at stage volume.

While it's easy to replicate classic Fender tones, this amp goes beyond that as well. With the addition of the Mid control, the tone stack is more versatile, and the Treble offers a nice top end, which starts to reach into an almost Vox-like "sparkle." The relationship between the Mid and Treble is interesting, with the latter's effect becoming less as the former is turned up. Experimenting with these two controls was what mainly took me in and out of Fender territory.

I used a USA Jazzmaster, a '79 Strat, and a '60s reissue Les Paul with great results, but achieved quite possibly my favorite guitar tone ever using a CIJ Telecaster. I got bite, clarity - and notes were well defined and just sang. The *Sportsman* responded well to the guitar's controls.

I had no problem finding a nice, mellow, jazzy tone. Naturally a variety of bluesy sounds are easy to get, and I loved how, when it was overdriven, notes would roll over into a very controllable feedback.

While some excellent riff rock crunch can be achieved with nothing more than the amp, to get into full-on gain territory, a pedal is necessary. Depending on where the Headroom control was set, a boost - in this case a Z.Vex Super Hard-On and a Seymour Duncan Pickup Booster - would act as either a solo boost or a gain stage that pushed the amp over the edge to thicker distortion. I found the most versatile setup to be with an overdrive pedal though - setting the amp just below breakup, and using one of my favorite ODs, the Ben Adrian KWB (based on the MXR/DOD 250/Ross circuit). I could take the amp from a nice, clean tone, with the guitar's volume rolled back a little; to a hotter rhythm setting, with the guitar's volume open; to a super crunch rhythm when I kicked in the KWB. That's a lot of tonal flexibility for only having one pedal in the chain. Using a full pedalboard, which included the usual time-based effects, everything checked out beautifully as well.

The reverb is wonderful and can take you from subtle to surf, and almost into dreamy territory, with the twist of a

knob. One flaw I found, however, is when the Reverb and the Headroom controls are dimed, a ringing feedback occurs, even when the guitar's volume is down. I tried damping the reverb tank with a pillow, but it wouldn't go away. My assumption is this is the nature of the beast, so to paraphrase the old doctor joke, if it happens when you set the knobs that way, the cure is to not set the knobs that way. Another criticism regarding the reverb is there is no footswitch jack. As an effect-oriented guitarist, I was forced to keep this nice-sounding reverb on a more subtle setting when I would like to be able to kick it in and out on demand. That got me thinking that it would be nice, if it were possible, to have a second footswitch to bring the Headroom control in and out of the circuit. Depending on how things were set, that could function as a solo boost or a gain increase. I suppose that could potentially muck up a simple and beautiful design, but I'll stand by the fact that an option for a reverb footswitch would be great.

My small studio has many different types of bands coming through it regularly, so I had a chance to run this amp through its paces, using it to record indie pop, garage rock, chamber pop, swamp blues, and hard rock. I mic'ed it with the usual suspects (SM7, SM57, MD 409, MD 609, MD 421), into a variety of preamps (Manley, Vintech, Altec) and was always delighted with how it sounded.

The *Sportsman* features a solidly-built pine cabinet, covered in durable Tolex. Its floating speaker baffle houses your choice of either a 12" Eminence Red White And Blues

speaker or a 10" Jensen Jet Falcon - 16 ohm, so you have the option of using an extension cabinet. A head-only model is available as well. It's loaded with a super stout TMI transformer. Two 6V6 tubes are in the power section. There's a 12AX7 for the preamp and another for the reverb return. There's a 12AT7 for the phase inverter and another handles the reverb send. More exotic Tolex is available for a \$200 upgrade. It's Class A, with a partial fixed bias. No need to rebias when you change tubes - just use a matched pair, and you're set. It delivers 16 clean watts and 19 when it's topped out.

At over \$2000, it's not exactly priced affordably, but I'll argue that anyone looking for a variety of classic Fender options can probably achieve it with this single amp. It will certainly earn its keep in any studio and get plenty of use. Not for one second would I question its reliability, and I'd confidently take it on the road. It's clearly built to last, and that alone carries value.

(\$2190 MSRP W/ 12" SPEAKER, \$2090 W/ 10",  
\$2010 HEAD ONLY; WWW.CARRAMPS.COM)  
-ALEX MAIOLO <STABLENET@NC.RR.COM>