

Traynor DarkHorse 15H All-Tube Guitar Head

By Alan Mann

The Traynor DarkHorse is an ultra-compact 15-watt all-tube guitar head/cab combo, totally suited for the studio, home, or travelling musician alike. Its simple gain, bass, treble, and master controls make it easy to dial in a pretty wide array of tonal options for a number of different styles of playing.

Both in terms of style and function, the amp boasts a straightforward layout that offers easy navigation. A single 1/4" input, four tone controls, the three-option Tonestack switch, diode/pentode selection switch, and of course, an on/off switch are all that adorn the front of this little single-channel design head. With no onboard effects or reverb, what you see is what you get.

The DarkHorse's unique and clever Tonestack switch allows players to choose between three completely different voicings: a clean and bright Fender-like "USA" setting or the slightly darker, meatier "Brit" setting. Additionally, the head features a "Pure" setting, allowing players to bypass the Tonestack option entirely and rely on the warm sound of the five included tubes (two 12AX7s, two matched 6V6s, and a single 12AU7, all hand-selected) for tone, giving your sound a considerable mid and gain boost. The amp is cathode biased with no feedback loop, bringing a classic tinge to the overall package.

The head also allows you to select between a 15-watt pentode (6V6) output stage with loads of headroom to an increased-drive 2-watt triode (12AU7) stage, both boasting class A output. Another great feature is the choice of 1 x 16-ohm, 1 x 8 ohm, and 2 x 16 ohm outputs, allowing guitarists to use the head with a number of different cabinet configurations.

Aesthetically speaking, the cab's rear is fastened with thumbscrews, and I was able to remove the back panel entirely, giving me the option of an open or closed back cab. Couple this with the DarkHorse's cool "hot rod" engine block look and the result is a pretty sleek package with an overall appearance that belies its small stature. Of course, the steel chassis brings an added level of durability and even noise immunity – both good for live use.

During my time with this little amp, I ran the gamut of tonal options, testing a lot of what's available – from clean setting all the way to a heavily-overdriven metal sound and pretty much everything in between. They all rang true in terms of tone and playability, making the DarkHorse a steady and reliable bet in most musical settings.



Personally, I found the amp sounded best with the humbuckers on my Les Paul rather than with my Stratocaster or Telecaster, but truthfully, the amp worked well with all three, bringing out each instrument's natural character.

With all of its features combined – the two user-selectable output stages and three unique Tonestack voicings – the DarkHorse boasts six distinct tonal offerings that almost make it as versatile as six individual amplifiers, making it an attractive solution for both the at-home musician or the gigging professional. Considering the fact that the head and cab both weigh in at less than 20 lbs. each (the head itself only 11 lbs.), set up and transportation could be a snap by car or even by air. (No more of those annoying Air Canada overage charges!) The head also comes with an over-the-shoulder padded carrying bag (the Traynor DHB1).

Another attractive feature? The amp is both designed and manufactured entirely in Canada, which (I think) is awesome. Finally, in terms of features and performance vs. overall value, with a street price of just over \$500, it's a great deal relative to what one could expect to pay for many bigger or boutique models with comparable output and features.

All in all, Traynor's DarkHorse 15H is a great little amp for pretty much any level of player, and comes highly recommended.

Alan Mann is currently on tour as the guitarist for the band Stars, hitting cities across Canada and the US throughout the winter of 2010. Visit www.youarestars.com for dates. Also, look for his new solo LP, out this winter. www.alanmannmusic.com.