



VOX'S VX I AND VX II

Modeling Guitar Amplifiers

By Dan Ferrisi

Korg USA's family of brands, which encompasses well-respected names that the company manufactures and those that it distributes, is enviable throughout the music products industry. Even among this bevy of beloved brands, though, VOX stands out for its innovation, product quality and price-to-performance ratio. And that's why, this month, *The Retailer's* shining a spotlight on VOX's VX I and VX II Modeling Guitar Amplifiers: brand new products that, although not yet released as of this writing, have already generated incredible buzz in the market and a groundswell of excitement and enthusiasm. To learn more about the company's latest creations, we spoke to Brian Piccolo, Brand Manager for VOX, and John Stippell, Product Manager – Guitar Brands. Their abundant enthusiasm was evident.

VOX has been exploring digital modeling technology for nearly 15 years, Stippell explained, and it has had great success in the category over the years with its various Valvetronix models. The VX series differs from what the company has done in the past, however, representing a new approach to modeling technology for VOX. "Rather than basing the amp models off of the sound-specific amplifiers that we have in our collection, as we've done in the past," Stippell explained, "we've developed a new approach that models the actual circuits and electrical components of an amplifier." VOX calls this new method VET: Virtual Element Technology. We'll soon explore that technology.

For his part, Piccolo surveyed the broad landscape of the amp category and zeroed in on great sound, a full feature set and aggres-

sive pricing—all wrapped in the security derived from a trusted and recognizable brand—as the most critical factors in earning consumers' business. Judged on all the metrics above, he said, VOX's VX I and VX II Modeling Guitar Amplifiers win plaudits. According to Piccolo, "These products represent our desire to evolve the typical practice amplifier, as well as the conventional modeling amplifier." He continued, "Oftentimes, with small practice amps, the sound quality suffers and it results in a less-than-inspiring playing experience. With the VX series, we wanted to make durable practice amplifiers that sound just like your favorite old tube amp...but that are a fraction of the weight and cost."

In a moment, we'll go back to the VX I and VX II's most indispensable distinguishing characteristic, Virtual Element Technology, which merits an in-depth discussion; first, though, let's provide some background about modeling. "It's referred to as 'modeling' because it's based on the existence of an original amplifier," Piccolo stated. "And, in the case of rare, vintage amps, it's not unusual for individual units of the same model to sound different, owing to the passage of time and the varying environments in which they've been used." He continued, "For these reasons, the selection of the original amp substantially influences the accuracy and sound quality of a modeling amp." Because the modeling analysis centers on the output sound, the condition of the amp is also highly influential; the unavoidable reliance on the human ear has an effect that is yet greater. "These factors make it difficult to say that the modeling accuracy extends to the tonal changes arising from the interaction between the tone controls, the volume and the various components," Piccolo added.

To resolve those issues, VOX's R&D team, in creating the VX I and VX II, completely rethought previous methods of modeling. This led to the development of VET, which models the actual circuit of the original amp. "An enormous amount of information about the vacuum tubes and each individual component was carefully analyzed in order to accurately reproduce the characteristics of the desired amplifier, as it was originally intended," Piccolo affirmed. "We feel it is, by far, the most accurate and realistic amp modeling we've done to date," he added. It's probably no surprise, then, that countless days and weeks of toil went into devising the VX I and VX II and their signature VET technology. "We wanted to do it properly," Piccolo stressed. "From concept to production, this specific series took about two years to create." Delivering such a robust feature set at a budget-minded price is just the cherry on top.

To obtain a more authentic sound and to produce sound more efficiently, VOX has employed a uniquely designed bass-reflex structure in conjunction with a sealed, one-piece speaker enclosure. "While providing an external appearance appropriate for a guitar amp," Piccolo began, "the cabinet's shape, the curvature of the front and back surfaces, and the internal-reinforcement ribs have all been carefully designed to optimize the resonance." VOX chose a conventional wooden baffle to retain the projection and tone of a classic guitar amp, whereas the

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I took in amp after amp after amp. When I got to the end of the aisles, on to the edge of the back warehouse, a long-haired, metal-looking clerk who was dismantling a guitar behind a small counter finally asked me if I needed any help. His eyebrows furrowed as he glanced in my direction.

"Do you carry many new amps?" I asked, not sure if he would tell me anything I didn't already know, having already thoroughly investigated every aisle. "We have a few," he responded. With that, another clerk, who sported long, brown, curly hair and who was possibly the store's Owner, emerged. "I'll show you," he said.

"Why are you looking for amps?" the man asked, giving me a 20-questions rundown, while

wearing a skeptical face, that was similar to what I'd experienced at Guitar Center. He seemed to be assessing my motives by the moment. I felt as though, perhaps, he was trying to crack through my spy charade; undaunted, I kept up the illusion in spite of his interrogative abilities.

"What do you play?" he asked, his hands on his hips. I told him I played a Fender Deluxe. "That's a good amp," he responded, asking, "Why are you even looking?" He added, "You don't need anything else." Then, he asked what type of music I play and what band I play in. When I tried, once again, to answer vaguely, he asked what the name of my band was. "Oh, it doesn't have a name," I responded. To my surprise, he nodded in agreement. "Names are useless anyway," he said. "Better to just go by your name than to have a band name," he continued. "That way, you get all the credit!" He was loosening up a bit, as if he had a bit of experience with this in his own past. Again, though, he told me I should stick with my own amp. "It's the only amp you'll ever need," he reiterated. "You don't need anything else."

"Sometimes, I like to look at what's out there," I told him unconvincingly. Then, I rushed back to my car, as he seemed done with me for the day and I needed to be on my merry way. The guitar amps whispered at my back as I left, but, alas, I couldn't do anything more with them, lest I be called out.

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The fourth and final store on my list was located in Cupertino, another part of Silicon Valley. Seeing the storefront in a strip mall, I worried immediately that it wouldn't have any amps. When I walked in, a very happy clerk greeted me, continuing to air drum as he had been when I'd walked in. When he asked what


I needed, I told him I was looking for amps. "We can order anything you want," he responded. "It usually gets here in a couple of days."

There were a couple of amps spaced out on the floor, but, mostly, I saw sheet music, a few guitars and a back room full of rental instruments for band practice. A Line 6 Spider IV 30 (\$229), a VHT Special 6 (\$250), an acoustic RMS AC40 and a Line 6 AMPLIFi 75 caught my eye.

The clerk, whose knowledge about the products was limited, didn't know the prices, either. That made me strongly suspicious that they were negotiable. It seemed as though this location specialized more in special orders than in stocking any particular item. A used Fender had come directly from the clerk's own garage.

"I used it for recording and then forgot about it," he said. When I asked the price, he replied, "Dirt cheap! I'd say no more than a buck fifty." As I got ready to go, he added, "Come by any time and plug in!" He was still air drumming, a smile across his face, when I left.

The Sale

Unfortunately, San Jose Rock Shop didn't have much in the way of new gear. As a result, I'd put them toward the bottom. Crossroads would likely come in slightly ahead of San Jose Rock Shop, owing to the clerk's extreme friendliness. The only thing that set the store back was not having much in stock, even though the clerk said the store had the ability to order almost anything I wanted. The Starving Musician had a lot of gear, but it was mostly used. I'd put that store toward the front of the pack, though. However, the winner this month is Guitar Center, which, I must say, had the best selection and some great, rock-bottom prices going for new gear. GC: you win this time! 

UNDER THE HOOD

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cabinet's construction from light-weight and durable ABS material is similar to that of professional, high-end audio systems. "The combination of these two materials yields a superior acoustical property that sounds superb, yet retains easy portability," Piccolo declared. "These unique elements all work together to deliver a level of sound quality that was previously unattainable with an amp in this class."

The VX series features 11 classic amp models and eight distinct effects, and it allows for 22 unique user presets. The amp

models cover a lot of ground, ranging from classic American and British amplifiers of the 1950s and 1960s, to the coveted sounds of the classic VOX AC30, to some modern, high-gain tone monsters. "Complementing these great amp sounds are eight classic effects," Stippell said, "which include chorus, flanger, phaser, tremolo, tape-style delay, analog-style delay and two types of reverb: spring and hall." He continued, "We like to include amp models and effects that we find fun and inspiring, and that offer players a lot of versatility."

Rounding out the robust feature set packed into the VX series, we turn to a new, FET-based analog power amp that was designed for the VX I and VX II to accurately reproduce the characteristics of a tube amp. "This FET-equipped power amp brings forth a level of responsiveness, dynamic overdrive and overall sound quality that would otherwise be unachievable in a digital modeling amplifier," Stippell enthused. And, as if all that weren't enough, the VX II comes equipped with a USB port for simple integration with a PC or Mac, and it comes bundled with

JamVOX III modeling software. ASIO driver support is provided, as well.

"We truly feel that the VX series will appeal to all types of customers: from beginners all the way to seasoned pros," Stippell remarked. "The sound quality of these amplifiers is truly remarkable, and this, combined with a host of easy-to-use features and a lightweight construction, makes these the ideal practice amps."

The VX I and VX II hit the market late last month, carrying street prices of \$99.99 and \$149.99, respectively. 