

Fryette Aether amplifier report

Introduction

In my basement studio, there are amplifiers everywhere. Vintage Fenders, Marshalls, a highly-prized '62 Vox AC-30, and a mid-80s Jazz Chorus. Lots of modern "boutique" amps of all shapes, sizes, and configurations. (although, come to think of it, I don't own a single 100-watt amp) Whereas I tend to get somewhat emotionally involved with my guitars, as far as I'm concerned, my amps are simply tools. I put them in functional boxes, generally by their output characteristics: tube types and output power.

Today I feel like an EL-84 type of sound. Great, fire up the AC-30. Or the Budda. Or the Top Hat.

Of course, like most guitar players, I have a certain comfort zone: for me, that's a pair of 6L6s, cathode-biased for a moderate, gig- and studio-friendly power output of around 30 watts. I have several amps with this configuration, my longtime favorite being a '63 Fender Vibrolux. (the brownface version, a 1x12 combo) When I heard about Steve Fryette's new amp project through the grapevine, my first thought was, "That's right in my comfort zone, but jeez, I already have 4 or 5 amps that are functionally there. Am I *really* interested in another one?"

The answer is: I was swept up in the unusually vehement enthusiasm of a few friends who are very accomplished players and somehow ended up as the recipient of the first production Aether to leave the Fryette shop. I'd been party to the whole discussion of the prototype on The Gear Page, so I had an idea about the amp's sound, functionality, and the intention behind it. Even so, I'm not sure any of that prepared me for what I'd encounter when the thing actually arrived and I started playing it.

To start with, I have to say the way the amp was packed for shipment spoke volumes. I've had more than a few amps shipped to me over the years. The care with which the packing materials were created, coddling the parts inside the cleanest, neatest cardboard box I've seen, was something to behold. The beauty and efficiency of the amp's housing speaks to me the same way. This is NOT just another appliance.

When I first plugged it in, turned it on, and fired up a guitar (which guitar? Hmmm, I don't even remember!) my first thought was, "Jimmy Page would love this amplifier!" Vast amounts of time and energy have gone into figuring out exactly what gear JP used on those early Led Zeppelin records. I realized quite a while ago that the exact gear *doesn't matter*. It's more that Page had a very clear idea about how an electric guitar *could* sound, and he marshalled (ha!) all of his experience in recording studios and on stages to put guitar sounds on tape that jump out of the speakers and feel *alive*, transcending the particular tools that were used.

The Aether does that. Whatever guitar I plug in sounds more like itself, more like the ideal the builder had in mind when (s)he built it and I had in mind when I bought it. The

amp *gives back*. And that's not simply a function of volume, as happens with all those amps where you have to crank them way up to get the good stuff. (I've learned the hard way that nobody my age wants to hear music played at that volume any more, even though they all did when they were young!) I get that lovely feeling of the notes I play expanding and filling the room, regardless of where the volume knob is on the amp. As a result, I play fewer notes! They sound and feel so good that I'm more inspired to stop and smell the roses, as it were.

My bandmates like that, by the way.

Sounds like?

Discussions about amplifiers most often seem to center around *archetypes*. The most basic, of course, being the category to which an amp supposedly belongs: "Fender" vs. "Marshall" vs. "Vox" being the most basic archetypal categorization. This is partly because of the familiarity most experienced guitar players have with those archetypes, especially those players who were around when those were pretty much the only viable options. It's also because most newer amplifiers generally fit fairly comfortably within one of those categories. And, possibly, because so many guitar players just want to sound like another guitar player whose records they listen to.

The Aether blows up these categorical distinctions in a manner that is similar to the way Ken Parker's obliterates the long-established distinctions between types of acoustic guitars. Based on the output section (a pair of 6L6s, cathode-biased) one might be tempted to classify it as belonging to the "Fender" family; in fact my longtime favorite Fender combo, a brown '63 Vibrolux that I've owned for years, shares this output configuration. But the Aether sounds nothing like the Fender, the fact that I'm quite sure Mark Knopfler (who used a similar Fender amp on the first Dire Straits record) would flip over the Aether notwithstanding.

So, what *does* the Aether sound like? I'll start by reflecting on conversations I've had about amplifiers and their sound with a couple of experienced professional guitarists with whom I happen to be friends: Steve Kimock and David Torn. Conversations about amps with those two tend to center on the whole circuit that we experience when we actually play: our selves (our ideas, imagination, feelings, and physicality), the guitar, the amplifier & speaker, whatever is between the guitar and the amp, and the sound that travels through the air and completes the loop. In terms of this circuit, the relationship between *what my fingers do* and *what comes out of the speaker(s)* is the focal point. From this perspective, a "good amplifier" is one for which the quality of this relationship is enhanced.

This, more than anything else, is what the Aether offers to a degree I've not experienced with any other amplifier. When I listen to the clips David Torn has posted on SoundCloud, I can hear how interactive the amp is, and that's only a pale shadow of what it actually feels like to be the one doing the playing. Ever listen to recordings of Coleman Hawkins playing tenor sax? There's an expressive, emotive quality to his playing that stands out to this day. Aside from the fact that it all emanates from his ideas and his soul,

the sound has everything to do with the connection between Hawkins' breath, his hands, and the instrument. At a simplistic level, it comes down to: Blow softer, and A happens. Blow harder, and B happens. But there's a whole world of complexity and nuance between A and B. With the Aether, I have more access to that world than I've ever had with an amplifier. It's what I've always imagined an amplifier ought to do, but it's always seemed like an unreachable ideal.

The best thing is, all that extra information and feedback comes through in a band setting. It's different, of course, because it's all filtered through the additional information that comes from a group of musicians playing electric instruments (and/or drums) together. But, even when I used the Aether while sitting in with a group that had two other guitarists, keyboards, drums, percussion, bass, and a fairly dense sonic and musical presentation, the Aether translated beautifully. It also cut through that dense mix in a way that made the other musicians, as well as the sound man, sit up and take notice.

Practical stuff

There's been a fair amount of discussion online about the unusual configuration whereby the Aether's power section is housed in a separate "lunch box" sized unit, with the preamp, controls, and reverb tank housed in a cabinet with the speaker. A lot of people seem to assume that the two traditional configurations, *head-and-cab* vs. *combo*, have somehow been etched in stone as *the way things should be forever and ever, amen*. Well, I happened to have three gigs within the first two weeks I owned the amp, which is unusual for me. I can report that the way the weight distribution and part-size works out is extremely gig-and-transport friendly. (caveat: I've already found out the hard way that the wooden logo needs to be protected from impact during transport...) Much more so than with either a combo (which is considerably harder and more awkward to carry) or with a head and cabinet, where the head is typically quite heavy for its size, and large enough to require more thought in packing one's vehicle for travel. My 55-and-counting-year-old back (and knees, and ankles...) are very happy. And the setup is quick and painless. My bandmates are very happy.

The Aether's stage volume has proven to be right in the sweet spot for onstage use with a band, at least in the small-to-medium sized rooms in which I've played. Bandmates like it because it sits in the mix well without being too loud or too directional. The PA guy likes it for the same reasons. I like it for reasons already described. What more could you ask from an amp for live use?

"Takes pedals well"

I've learned over the years that I prefer amps where the input stage has a lot of headroom. I don't like the compressed, squashed sound of a lot of modern amps that are designed primarily to sound good with a level of gain that I would never use, at an SPL level that wouldn't offend one's house-mates. Not coincidentally, an input stage with a lot of headroom tends to correlate strongly with the ability to use a wide range of pedals to increase the range of expression (and gain) available. Personally, I tend to prefer the flavor that good fuzz pedals impart; if I want that "cranked amp" sound, well, I just crank the amp. (in particular, the amp's output stage) The Aether plays well with all of the fuzz

pedals I've thrown at it. At the same time, with the volume knob at 3 pm or thereabouts, it throws out some of the most delicious amp-centric mayhem that I've ever tasted. It's loud, but nothing like my 50-watt plexi, which has to be in another room for me to be able to handle it at that level of gain.

Versatility

Somehow, the idea of “versatility” in an amp has come to mean “three (or more) channels, with independent eq and masters on all three, possibly with a whole raft of switchable voicings.” I sort of get that, especially if you play in a cover band where for one tune you need to be “Ed Van Halen” and for the next you need to be “Mark Knopfler.” But in that case, I'd argue you're better off using an Axe-FX through the PA than getting sort-of-like-it sounds out of a do-it-all amp. I'd also argue that having a great-sounding single-channel amp, maybe a few pedals, and knowing how to really dial things in, is a perfectly viable strategy, and one that is vastly underappreciated these days. The other night at rehearsal with one of my bands, a funk-blues outfit, we played one tune that called for some nice clean sounds, even a little Wes-inspired octave action. Next up was a Freddie King blues tune. Without changing guitars or the settings on my amp, and without the aid of any pedals, I did both, with sounds that left me (as well as my bandmates) saying “Really? That amp does *that?!?*”

Yes.

Yes, it does.

Kingsley Durant

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