

## Review: Sound City Master Lead 50 Head and SC30 Combo

Sound City's brand-new Master Lead 50 Head and SC30 Combo deliver tone in its purest form.

Art Thompson · Jun 4, 2018

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The Sound City music store in London during the mid '60s was at the epicenter of British rock—as, of course, was Jim Marshall's retail shop. However, Marshall was way ahead of Sound City owner Ivor Arbiter, as his amps were already making a name for themselves on stages in the U.K. and abroad. As the story goes, Mr. Arbiter wanted to get in on the action, and he needed someone to design amps for him that could take on Marshall. He picked well in choosing Dave Reeves for the task, although it's not at all clear as to how Reeves—who later went on to start Hiwatt—became involved with Sound City. A good guess is that Arbiter made him an offer to build a run of

amps under the store name, and that's what he did—for a while anyway.

Sound City didn't start small, either, as Reeves developed a 100-watter straight away that was marketed as a lower-priced competitor to Marshall. After Reeves' departure, Sound City amps went through some changes—seemingly for the worse—and were gone from the scene by the mid '70s. Following the ultimate demise of Sound City, the name—along with all Arbiter rights—were acquired in 2016 by partners Steve Fryette and Neal Ostberg.

Fryette is a longtime Hiwatt fan, and he is very familiar with the designs created by Dave Reeves, so one might chalk it up to destiny that an opportunity came along that enabled him to design a new series of Sound City amps, which were introduced at the 2017 Winter NAMM show. What we have on review here are the Master Lead 50 head and SC30 combo that represent the first wave of Sound City models to roll out of their Southern California factory.

## **MASTER LEAD 50**

In classic British form, the ML 50 has two channels—Normal and Brilliant—and a quartet of inputs to feed them. The amp actually comes with a short jumper cable connecting two of the inputs, which is the old-school way of combining channels for a boost in gain. The balance of the silver Plexiglas-covered front panel has controls for Normal Volume, Brilliant Volume, Master, Treble, Middle, Bass, and Presence, along with Mains and Standby switches. The rear panel, which is silver-painted steel, holds the fuse holders and a trio of speaker jacks: one 16 $\Omega$  and two labeled 4 $\Omega$ /8 $\Omega$  with a selector to choose the desired impedance for your setup.

The build quality is of high order throughout. The birch-ply cabinet is neatly clad in black Tolex with white piping accents, and the chassis reflects the best of modern PCB design with a heavy-duty board that is reinforced in all the critical areas for pots, tube sockets, etc. Worth noting is the Partridge inspired, paper-insulated output transformer used here (as well as on the SC30), which is one of the essential elements in how this amp is designed to sound.

The Master Lead 50 epitomizes the plugin-and-turn-it-up amplifier experience. This is the way it used to be, and the new Sound City amps greatly benefit from Fryette's engineering and tonal smarts. He has preserved the essence of what Dave Reeves innovated back in the late '60s, while making thoughtful tweaks as necessary to create an amp that's totally suitable for today's players.

As a modern rendition of Reeves' 1967 100-watt model, the Master Lead 50 retains his concept of power-stage saturation, and this is definitely what makes the ML 50 so special. Getting the tonal goodies from it is Cro-Magnon simple, but a quick glance at the tag on the amp's handle recommends that you connect the jumper differently for the type of guitar being used: For humbuckers, plug into the #2 bore on the Normal side and jumper between #1 Normal and #4 Brilliant. For single-coils, do sort of the opposite by plugging into the #4 bore on the Brilliant side and jumper from #2 Normal to #3 Brilliant. This is the combination I used with a Strat and Tele, and it definitely optimized the circuit for these brighter pickups, although plugging in a Les Paul the same way did not darken it excessively either. I turned the Normal channel up about halfway, put the Brilliant Volume and Master all the way up, set the tone controls initially around their mid points and had at it.

Along with insane volume blowing out of the Sound City 212 cabinet, I was instantly rewarded with a crushing overdrive tone of the sort that can make you wonder why OD pedals are even necessary when you have an amp like this. Yes, there's that much muscular, complex, and beautifully saturated distortion on tap, and it's dynamically responsive, too. Just use your guitar's Volume knob to go between wailing leads and dirty rhythm, and that's all there is to it. An attenuator certainly makes it easier to live with the ML 50's massive volume potential, and I used both the Fryette Power Station (\$699 street) and Universal Audio OX (\$1,299 street) when playing the ML 50 around the house, and they both allowed the sound of those pushed Mullard EL34s to come through in a very appealing way. Yes, the ML 50 has an

effective Master, but the true glory of this amp is best experienced when its output stage is running at full tilt.

Kudos to Steve Fryette for not loading up this new model with channel switching, gain boosts, effects loops, etc. What the Master Lead 50 delivers is tone in its purest form, and it's simply up to you to discover how best to deploy this amazing rendition of one of Britain's long-lost secret weapons.

### **SC30**

This 1x12 combo also derives its DNA from the same original 100-watt Reeves design that the Master Lead 50 and the soon-to-be-released Master 100 are based on. The SC30 is a different kind of amp, however, in that it uses a pair of Gold Lion KT66 power tubes running cathode bias to make 30 watts. This scheme also allows you to swap in 6L6 or 5881 tubes (or other variants) without rebiasing the amp, which is a nice aspect. The SC30 also uses a 5AR4 rectifier tube, and besides what this contributes to the dynamic feel, its slow warmup negates the need for a standby switch (though I'd still favor having one). There's one input jack, and the Normal and Brilliant channel Volumes are internally "jumped" to yield the most gain and provide the ability to mix the channels to suit. There's no Master Volume, and the EQ consists of Bass, Middle, and Treble. Last in line on the silver plexi top-panel is the Reverb control, which adjusts the return level from the tube-driven Accutronics 3-spring pan situated at the bottom of the birch-ply cabinet.



Auditioned with the same Strat, Tele, and Les Paul, the SC30 proved just as easy to dial in as the ML 50. With the Normal control at about halfway and the Brilliant Volume full up, the distortion sounded righteously chewy and so dynamic and inspiring that it was hard to stop playing. The fat, splintery overdriven tones are couched in a perfectly balanced realm, where the sustain feels like it's blooming under your fingers and the touch-responsive grind is so abundant that it isn't necessary to switch on an OD or boost pedal when going from dirty rhythm to solos. Here again, it's the output stage being pushed into saturation that makes the magic happen, and despite the obvious difference between KT66s and EL34s—as well as how the SC30's tube rectification softens up the attack—the overall experience was akin to playing a slightly less-aggressive version of the ML 50. The SC30 is plenty loud when cranked up, but running it through the 8Ω Sound City 212 increases its sonic output, and is the way to go if more stage volume is needed. This amp cleans up well at lower volume settings, and it's great with pedals in this mode thanks to the abundant headroom provided by the KT66 output stage when it's not being driven so hard. The reverb sounds great, too, covering the gamut from light reflections to more than enough spro-ingy wash for a surf gig.





All in all, the SC30 is an amp that would be great for rock, blues, R&B, or what have you—and it's great to know there's a tiger lurking inside and poised to take your head off when you unleash its fury!

## **SPECIFICATIONS**

**CONTACT** [soundcityamp.com](http://soundcityamp.com)

**Master Lead** 50

**PRICE** \$1,995 street

**CHANNELS** 2

**CONTROLS** Normal Volume, Brilliant Volume, Master, Treble, Middle, Bass, Presence

**POWER** 50 watts

**TUBES** Three 12AX7 and one 12AT7 preamps tubes, two EL34 power tubes

**EXTRAS** Three speaker outs: 1x16Ω, 2x8Ω/4Ω with selector

**SPEAKER** Tested with Sound City SC212 (\$995 street)

**WEIGHT** 41 lbs

**BUILT** USA

**KUDOS** An awesome-sounding rendition of a long-lost British classic.

**CONCERNS** None—unless you need an FX loop.

## **SC30**

**PRICE** \$2,395 street

**CHANNELS** 2

**CONTROLS** Normal Volume, Brilliant Volume, Treble, Middle, Bass, Reverb

**POWER** 30 watts

**TUBES** Three 12AX7 and two 12AT7 preamp tubes, two KT66 power tubes, 5AR4 rectifier

**EXTRAS** Tube driven Accutronics 3-spring reverb pan. Three speaker outs (4Ω, 8Ω, 16Ω)

**SPEAKER** Special design 12" 75W 8Ω Sound City Power Speaker by Fane

**WEIGHT** 48 lbs

**BUILT** USA

**KUDOS** Quite possibly the most British-rock attitude I've ever heard from a 1x12 combo.

**CONCERNS** None.

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By Art Thompson