

## Rocket A20R Class-A All-Tube Recording Amp:

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## Bench Tests: Workhorses of a Different Color

### *New Amps, New Attitudes*

*"ADA / Rocket A20R Class-A All-Tube Recording Amp:  
 A boldly idiosyncratic 20-watt, 1x12 combo designed for studio use"*

It's sometimes difficult to describe new mid-sized tube amps without referencing Fender and Vox. For many players, those two manufacturers have established the enduring benchmarks for club-sized combos. But four new amps from ADA/ Rocket dare to position themselves outside those twin spheres of influence. While these evaluations are littered with Fender and Vox references, it's chiefly to underscore how the new arrivals differ from those vintage touchstones.

A new tube combo from ADA's recently launched Rocket line announces its studio aspirations up front. The A20R Class-A All-Tube Recording Amplifier (\$550) is a 20\_watt, 1x12 combo driven by a single EL34 power tube. It's an attractive bit of streamlined, single-purpose design. No channel switching, no effects loop, no line out, not much volume ~ this no frills amp was designed to sing to a studio mike, not a club audience.

With its rounded corners, leather handle and textured brown surface, the A20R looks more like Sam Spade's suitcase than a high-tech amp. From the two-tone grille to the stove-type knobs and future-past logo, this is retro design at its giddiest. But there is nothing backward-looking about the A20R's sound. While its single-tube, class-A design suggests in theory a pumped-up version of Fender's class-A, Single-6V6 Champ, the Rocket delivers a much more hi-fi sound

but in terms of smooth response and immaculate balance.

The A20R offers a singular mix of tube warmth and hi-fi clarity. The tones are disarmingly clean and even, with articulate highs, taut lows and smooth mids. Complex chords retain their definition, even with the amp cranked. But the Rocket's precise, full-frequency sound is a dramatic departure from the idiosyncratic tonal peaks and dips of classic combo amps. Guitars played through the A20R don't sound as if they were recorded direct or via piezoelectric pickups, but they have some of the sonic attributes of instruments amplified through such relatively clinical means. The amp's consistency recalls some of the better solid-state amps, yet there's no shortage of, tube warmth ~ higher gain settings break up evenly and have a nice, singing raspiness, though you'll need a stompbox for serious grind.

The top mounted controls are simple: bass, mid, treble, volume and reverb, plus switches for brightness, gain boost and "power amp thrust" (it switches between a more damped, controlled tone and a loose, more open one). The tone pots impose dramatic sweeps and respond consistently throughout their ranges.

Above all, the amp sounds *even*. By nature it delivers the sorts of balanced tones that players often attain via preamps and compressors.

just about any spring unit we've encountered. Maximum reverb settings are relatively modest, by, say, Fender standards ~ this amp doesn't do full-bore surf-era drip.

The A20R does record handsomely. It sound full even at minimal volumes, and parts emerge with compact, compressed precision. Tones remain consistent as you turn up—the highs never leap out at you. For better or worse, the amp is devoid of small-combo trashiness. Those who revel in the anarchic edges of small vintage tube amps may find it a bit cold and predictable. Thick, contrapuntal and harmonically complex parts are well served by its clarity, but we occasionally found ourselves reaching for the mixing board's midrange pots to add pointy edges to simple, aggressive figures.

The A20R is truly one-of-a-kind amp. It excels at its studio aspirations, even if it omits some features one might wish for on a dedicated recording amp, notably a standby switch and line- and speaker-out jacks (the speaker connection is hidden behind a rear-panel metal plate, which also impedes quick tube changes). Those who thrive on the lo-fi idiosyncrasies of an overdriven combo may be put off by the Rocket's phlegmatic precision, but those who'd like to capture their playing with crisp definition and near-orchestral balance should investigate this boldly original box.

- not in a brittle or cold way,

Even the mini-tank reverb is clean and smooth. In fact, its even decay sounds more like that of a digital reverb than

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