



Blackheart
Killer Ant



Group Test

Affordable valve amps

Valve amps aren't just the reserve of the aristocracy, and TG sets out to prove it with four low-powered beauties that will take your tone to another dimension...

WORDS HENRY YATES



Blackstar HT-5 mini-stack

Peavey ValveKing Royal 8



Blackstar

VOX AC4TV



Flip the page to find out which one won our Group Test head-to-head

We ain't gonna lie to you – owning a valve amp isn't all peaches and cream. First to take the hit is your wallet, as you fork over one month's salary for the amp itself, another for FX pedals (no self-respecting valve amp includes them) and periodic tenners when the valves need replacing. Then it's your spine, as you hump that deceptively heavy combo up the venue stairs, and finally your eardrums, if you've chosen an old-school 'purist' model with one volume and no gain control.

And then – just as you're on the brink of defecting to the cheaper and infinitely more practical world of solid-state – you flick the switch, the lightbulbs glow in the back, the undiluted sound of rock 'n' roll barks forth and your face arranges itself into a massive grin. The technology might be half-a-century old, but the enduring truth is that *nothing* sounds

as good as genuine valves being pushed into distortion. That's why we put up with all the other shit.

It's a common misconception that you need a wall of Marshalls to nail that kind of killer tone. In fact – as evidenced by Jimmy Page's decision to record Led Zep albums using smaller valve models – it's often the case that low-watt amps have the sweetest sound.

Roar-some foursome

As the ultimate luxury for the guitarist, you might imagine the worldwide recession would have wiped out the demand for boutique valve amps. On the contrary, when TG headed out into the marketplace we found it

rammed to the gunnels with choice, overflowing with quality, and home to several young bucks jostling the old guard of VOX, Marshall and Fender.

We could have filled our boots. Instead, we reined ourselves in and chose four valve amps that we hope will rock your world. A VOX amp was always on the cards, and when the British legend offered to send us the spanking-new AC4TV (£218) before anyone else sees it, we weren't about to turn it down. A few phone calls later and it was joined by the Peavey ValveKing Royal 8 (£146), before we threw a couple of mini-stacks into the ring in the form of the Blackheart Killer Ant (£135) and the Blackstar HT-5 (£349). ■

"LOW WATT AMPS OFTEN SOUND THE SWEETEST - EVEN JIMMY PAGE USED SMALL VALVE AMPS TO RECORD LED ZEP"



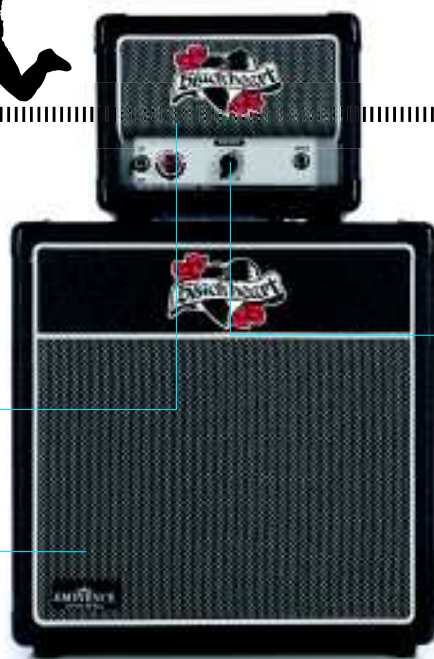
Blackheart Killer Ant

Stack attack!

£135

Head ■
The Killer Ant delivers 0.25 watts of tube power

Cabinet ■
The cab can dish out a beating with a 30 watt, 10-inch speaker



Volume ■
The Killer Ant takes a minimalist approach with just one volume knob!

At a glance

Blackheart Killer Ant

TYPE: Valve mini stack
OUTPUT: 0.25 watts
SPEAKER: 10" Eminence
VALVES: 2x 12AX7 [power block]
CONTROLS: Power, volume
SOCKETS: Input, output
WEIGHT: 5.5kg (head), 12.6kg (cab)
DIMENSIONS [HXDXW]: 200 x 250 x 185mm (head), 396 x 380 x 280mm (cab)
CONTACT: Loud Technologies 01494 557398
WEB: www.blackhearteng.com

Pound-for-pound, the ant is the hardest mutha in the animal kingdom, and it's a principle that Blackheart Engineering have applied to this small-but-deadly Class A mini-stack.

The sizzle: At just 0.25-watts, Blackheart has the Killer Ant head earmarked as a purchase for "apartment dwellers and recording sessions, delivering the tone and attitude you want when volume needs to be kept at bay". There's serious spec



at work, from the valve 'power block' to the boot-proof birch construction, but the knob count is firmly in the vein of old-school 60s models with just one master volume to play with ("the rest is up to you," says Blackheart). The

Killer Ant head can be paired to a 4x12 cab, but would look ridiculous atop anything other than the 1x10 BH110 cab.

We say: The Killer Ant is positively arrogant in its simplicity, and TG has to question whether this model will suit its target demographic. To get this Ant to roar, you have to drive the valves, which means cranking the volume, which means the bloke from downstairs banging a broom on the ceiling. Conceptually, that

got us frustrated, but the Ant fought back with a tone akin to an audio orgasm. Starting off warm and jangly, the output gets fat as you twist the volume, with frayed notes punching through the speaker and the valves responding to the light and shade of your dynamics. Screw the neighbours – we love it.

SUMMARY

For: Cool styling and heavenly tone

Against: We missed a tone control

★★★★☆

TG says: The purist's choice

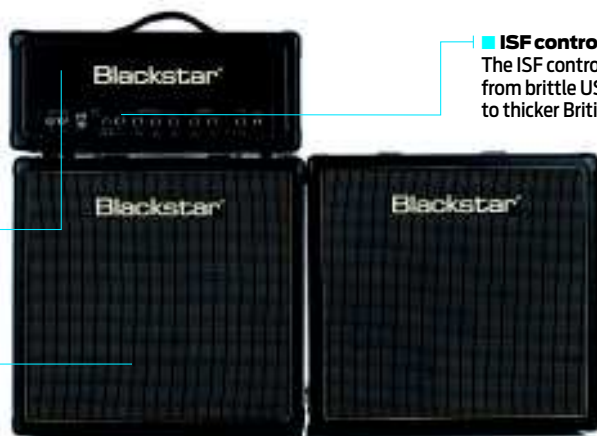
Blackstar HT-5 mini stack

Tall, dark and handsome

£349

Head ■
The HT-5H head is more tweakable than most with an array of controls

Cabinets ■
It's small, but with two cabs the HT-5 still rocks hard!



ISF control ■
The ISF control takes you from brittle US distortion to thicker British roar

Back in 2007, TG declared Blackstar's HT valve pedals "skull-cracking". Now, just as we finish bandaging the damn thing back up, the Brit up-and-comers send us this two-channel tower of power. Pass the aspirin.

The sizzle: The HT-5 mini stack might look a bit pricey, but this is serious artillery that outguns the competition on paper. In marked contrast to the Killer Ant, this stack's trump card is



a five-watt valve HT-5H head with a three-band EQ, ISF tone-shaping facility and a power amp section that "sounds full and toneful even at the lowest volume, producing the crunch

and break-up characteristics of a traditional 100W output but at much lower volume". Throw in a pair of meaty 1x10 HT-110 cabs and suddenly that £349 price tag doesn't look so steep.

We say: TG loves buttons and lights as much as the next gearhead, but a valve amp lives or dies on its raw tone. Happily, this one backs up Blackstar's claims, delivering a thick, vintage bark when you dig in with a pick and moving from a woolly British

roar to streamlined US filth with a turn of the intuitive ISF dial. Be warned that with no FX to hide behind and a tone whose genius hinges on what you do with your hands, this amp may embarrass novices, but if you've got the fire, this could be the one. Consider our skull cracked. Again.

SUMMARY

For: Good sonic options

Against: A bit expensive

★★★★☆

TG says: Worth the wedge

"THERE IS NO SOUND LIKE THE UNMISTAKABLE ROAR OF A VOX BREAKING INTO OVERDRIVE"

Peavey ValveKing Royal 8

Hail to the King

£146

Inputs

Two inputs means the Royal 8 can cope with anything from a Tele to an active ESP



Dials

The master volume dial means you won't wake the neighbours

Chassis

It's what inside that counts: valves and an eight inch speaker

At a glance

Peavey ValveKing Royal 8

TYPE: Valve combo
OUTPUT: 5 watts
SPEAKER: 1x8"
VALVES: 1x 12AX7, 1x EL84
CONTROLS: Gain, tone, volume
SOCKETS: 2x inputs (low/high gain), headphone jack
WEIGHT: 9.6kg
DIMENSIONS [HXDXW]: 336 x 406 x 210mm
CONTACT: Peavey Electronics 01536 461234
WEB: www.peavey.com

With 44 years in the game and the patronage of everyone from Trivium to Bullet For My Valentine, Peavey doesn't need us to tell it what a legend it is. Let's hope this Class A combo is worthy of that iconic squiggle.

The sizzle: Just because Peavey has designed the Royal 8 for rehearsals doesn't mean it skimped on the spec. Apparently, this five-watt combo will supply the "punchy dynamics and tones



that inspired rock's greatest riffs", thanks to dual volume and gain controls that let us crank the power and preamp sections for different flavours of distortion. It's also the only contender to feature high and low gain inputs

— perfect if you're alternating between a Stratocaster and an EMG-equipped shred machine.

We say: It's an ugly little spud, but TG fell for the Royal 8 in a big way. Rocking a Telecaster on the bridge pickup, with the gain cranked and volume backed off, we were knocked sideways by the 'hot-knife-through-butter' tones, while flipping to the neck pickup and pumping the volume brought in a butch swagger that shook the room like a small earthquake and cleaned

up at the Led Zepplin licks. Whichever way the dials are pointing, the bottom line is that this unassuming combo offered a level of drama and attack at odds with its dowdy appearance, made a mockery of its lowly price tag and came within touching distance of the gold medal. Nice one, your majesty.

SUMMARY

For: A tonal tude for the price

Against: It's not much to look at

★★★★☆

TG says: Silver medal for Peavey

VOX AC4TV

Best of British

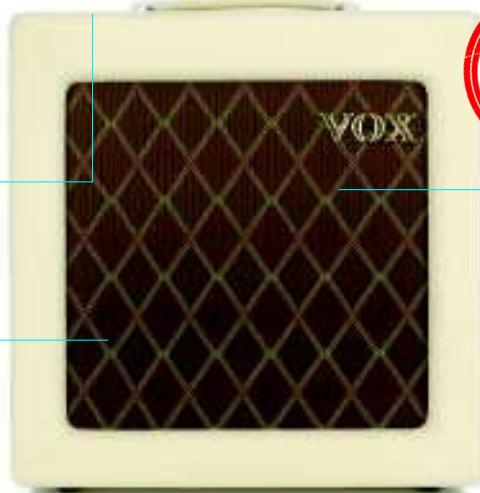
£218

Dials

The Op Level dial makes the modern AC4 perfect for low-volume practice

Grille

The ragged tone is pumped through a 10-inch speaker



Front

VOX has retained the classic retro styling of the 1961 original

At a glance

VOX AC4TV

BODY: Valve combo
OUTPUT: 4 watts (max)
SPEAKER: 1x10" VX10 Celestion
VALVES: 1x 12AX7, 1x EL84
CONTROLS: Volume, tone, Op Level
SOCKETS: Input, speaker output
WEIGHT: 8.9kg
DIMENSIONS [HXDXW]: 374 x 350 x 214 mm
CONTACT: Korg UK 01908 857100
WEB: www.voxamps.com

White leather is not to be encouraged in rock 'n' roll. But when it's wrapped around the all-tube AC4 combo from British amp legends VOX, we'll make an exception.

The sizzle: The world has turned a few times since the original AC4, and while VOX has retained the 60s retro styling, this replica has modern guts. "This up-to-date Class A version retains the distinctive EL84 power tube and



has a 12AX7-powered preamp driving a custom Celestion 10-inch speaker," notes the sales patter. But perhaps the best facelift is a built-in power attenuator that allows you to

rock out at four, one or 0.25-watt output levels, "ensuring you never lose that classic tube tone even at the lowest listening levels".

We say: There is no sound on earth that grabs attention like the unmistakable roar of a VOX breaking into overdrive. You'll find amps with more bottom-end and aggression, for sure, but the AC4 proves once again this brand is the daddy for British-flavoured bite. Starting out on the lowest wattage setting, TG

was pleased to find the tubes break beautifully under heavy picking, but it wasn't long before we pushed the volume and treated our postcode to the toppy punch that has fuelled the music of everyone from The Beatles to Babysambles. Make your band the next on that list.

SUMMARY

For: Cool brand, wicked features

Against: Not a single thing!

★★★★★

TG says: Great white bark