



Blade RH4 Classic & Durango Deluxe DD-2

£1,225 & £649

Gary Levinson's Blade range returns to the UK, but do the 'classic' RH4 and the latest Durango models cut it? by *Simon Bradley*



Gary Levinson is a shoo-in on any prospective list of 'great guitar innovators of our time' and ever since the first Levinson Blade guitar was introduced in 1988, the futuristic look and wealth of tones have always been sought after. See our interview with Gary for more details on both the history of these guitars and a selection of their features, and although the first edition of the R4 sported a trio of single coils, we reckon that the majority of guitarists would regard the HSS-configured RH-4 as the quintessential Blade. Let's take a look...

RH4 Classic

Although models such as the Texas Standard Pro and Delta Classic marry traditional, Fullerton-flavoured looks with arguably the best-known Levinson innovation, the VSC circuit (more on this later), this new version of the RH-4 will bring back many memories.

The range of see-thru finishes – misty violet in this case but also the even more defining honey option – allow the exaggerated grain of the Far Eastern Sen ash body to be fully visible and, with the classic sepia mirror scratchplate adding an unavoidably futuristic vibe to the guitar, that's a unique look straight away.

The key to the original and many subsequent Blades' sonic versatility was the Variable Spectrum Circuit (VSC). In simple terms, this is a design controlled by a three-way micro switch that can add amounts of bass, or midrange plus treble, to all pickup selections: the precise boost mounts can be altered via a trio of trim pots on the guitar's rear.

"We're now on the VSC-3 – the third generation," says Levinson. "That's what's on both guitars you have on review. We've replaced the IC with a dual chip which gives us the ability to completely separate the midrange boost from the treble and bass boost. It's just like having two preamps in the guitar and gives you better control of the different tonalities. Also,



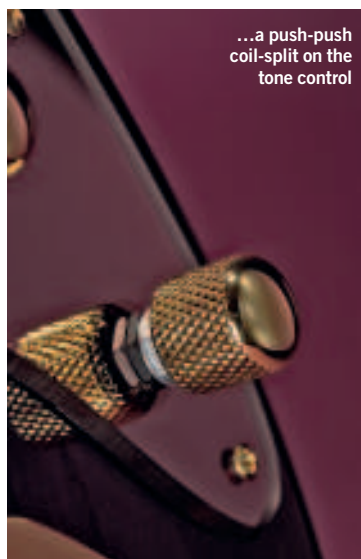
The RH4 features a five-way pickup selector, along with...

the battery drain has been reduced once again."

Since the late-eighties original various changes have been made. "We've made some minor changes in the frequency boosts," Levinson explains. "The midrange boost is still centred at 150Hz and we've changed the treble boost centre frequency from 7,500Hz down to 6,500Hz. The bass boost is the same as it's always been, at 160Hz."

"The VSC can be used in a couple of ways depending on the type of music you play. There are guys that are playing Top 40 stuff, playing everything from Dire Straits to Nickelback or whatever – they need variety. Then there are the people that like the guitar and the way it sounds but depending on the type of music they play, and the amp set-up they use, they can tweak the sound, via the VSC's trim-pots, to get that specific tone. That's why you have the ability to switch the VSC in or out and have the ability to change the amount of boost on various frequencies – it's the ability to personalise your sounds."

Electrically, the RH-4 is loaded with an LH-55 humbucker (modelled after



...a push-push coil-split on the tone control

BLADE RH4 CLASSIC	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** An absolute classic; full of more tones than you thought possible
- **WE DISLIKED** The unique look might put you off. Don't let it...

an early Gibson PAF) along with a duo of V-3 hum-cancelling single-coil-sized humbuckers and, complementing the VSC and standard five-way pickup selector, is a push-push coil-split on the tone control.

As was ever the case, the hard rock maple neck is finished in the same hue as the body but unlike the originals, it is now finished with nitro-cellulose. On first impression the neck is a fairly chunky affair, although your hand soon gets used to the modern feel, and any truss tweaks are certainly simple in the extreme to perform: just remove the plate at the end of the ebony fretboard to discover the E-Z Access truss compartment.

Levinson outlines other features such as the revolutionary Falcon vibrato in our chat at the end of this

Blade RH4 Classic

PRICE: £1,225 (w/case)

ORIGIN: Japan

TYPE: Offset double cutaway solidbody

BODY: Sen ash

NECK: Hard rock maple

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 318mm (12.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Graphite/42mm

FRETS: 22, jumbo

HARDWARE: Falcon

double-action pivot

vibrato, Sperzel Trimlok

locking tuners

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 55mm

ELECTRICS: Blade LH-

55 Vintage humbucker,

two x V-3 stacked

humbuckers, five-way

selector, master volume,

master tone with push/

push coil-split, Variable

Spectrum Control (VSC-

3) active preamp

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5

OTHER FEATURES: E-Z

Access truss rod access

OPTIONS: The RH-2,

offering a swamp ash

body, VSC and two VS-1

single coils alongside an

LH-55 HB, costs £739

FINISHES: Honey, misty

violet (reviewed), see thru

red, ocean blue, cherry

SCV London

0208 418 1470

www.bladeguitars.com

The rivals

RH-4 CLASSIC

Charvel San Dimas NOS

HSS £1,549

Fender Deluxe Power

Strat £699

Yamaha Pacifica 812V

£619

The Charvel's neck and

Seymour Duncan-driven

tones are excellent

indeed. Many of the

Fender's versatile HSS

example also offers a

Fishman Power bridge.

The flagship of the

Pacifica range provides

a slick neck alongside

a brace of Duncan

pickups and high

construction values.



BLADE DURANGO DELUXE DD-2
As RH-4 except...
PRICE: £649 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Mahogany with flamed maple veneer
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75-inch)
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
NUT/WIDTH: White synthetic/43mm
HARDWARE: Blade TOB-16 wraparound bridge/enclosed tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53.5mm
ELECTRICS: Two LHN-5 humbuckers, VSC-3 active preamp (as RH4), master volume, master tone, three-way lever pickup selector
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.7/5.9
OPTIONS: The DD-1, an all-mahogany guitar loaded with high-powered LHN-4 pickups, costs £559
FINISHES: Black cherry burst (as reviewed), antique honeyburst, antique tobaccoburst

BLADE DD-2	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The lightweight body and the massive tones
■ **WE DISLIKED** A coil-split would have been the cherry on the confection

→ review, so all that's left is to do is to plug the RH-4 in...

SOUNDS: It's difficult to know where to start, such is the choice of tones. Between the five-way, the coil-split where relevant, the tone control itself, not to mention the open-ended structure of the VSC, it seems to us that virtually every possible tone you've ever heard is attainable: Levinson's boast of a bell-like treble boost is right on the money for starters.

At one end of the scale, with a full bass boost on the humbucker and a driving amp, the tone could be a smoothly vintage PAF nestling in the neck of a late fifties Les Paul Standard. Flick to position two on the five-way, add a soupçon of midboost, activate the coil tap and you have a hot Telecaster, full of abrasive twang. We could go on, so we suggest you check the CD demo for much more, but take it from us that the clean tones offered by the RH-4 are second to none.

Durango Deluxe DD-2

This is one of two brand new designs from Blade, loosely based on the model now called the Durango Standard. Even though the guitar possess a shorter 'Gibson' scale length, the small body size plus the TOB-16 wraparound bridge does make you feel slightly cramped when playing seated: imagine if Music Man came up with their own slant on an SG. Of course, when

strapped on it's perfectly balanced and, weighing in at a mere 2.7 kilos, won't worry anyone afflicted with Osteogenesis Imperfecta.

The two pickups are virtually identical to the LH-55 loaded in the RH-4, albeit with a few more turns of wire to increase the girth of the tone in order to overcome any effects from the thin body – just 30mm deep at the rear strap pin. They're chosen by an increasingly scarce three-way blade selector and regulated via master tone and volume pots: note the lack of a coil-split here, which is a shame.

A lovely 2mm thick bookmatched flamed maple veneer caps the mahogany body and the one-piece mahogany set neck offers a wide and thin profile loved by most modern players.

SOUNDS: We even more urgently suggest checking out our demo on this issue's CD as the perception of a 'boosted Les Paul' here couldn't be

more accurate. With full bass boost and a heavy overdrive amp setting, the neck pickup transforms into a cello, a tone that could easily double as the soupy Wolfmother rhythm sound. The bridge humbucker benefits most richly from a touch of midboost to add bark to basic chords and licks, but if anything the overall performance is too dark at times.

Still, aping any of the myriad of famous Les Paul users is a doddle here, from a brash Jimmy Page to an infinitely sustaining Gary Moore, plus all points in between.

Verdict

Not that Blade have been anywhere, we're very happy to be able to get to grips once again with our old friend the RH-4 as well as spend time with a new pal, the DD-2. The VSC controls sound




The Durango's bridge is a Blade TOB-16 wraparound

better than ever, making these guitars easily amongst the most versatile we've ever played. Build quality (for the price) is also high.

Even though the perception that only session players or gigging guitarists in covers bands should consider a Blade may be held by some, the rest of us would receive a career's worth of tone from either of these models.

The Durango offers a genuine alternative to those of us priced out of the Gibson market and, with a sleek body and modern feel to the neck, would make a welcome addition to anyone's arsenal. We reckon that the RH-4 will continue to polarise opinion but, if the flashy scratchplate and misty finishes don't take your fancy, the countless tones that reside therein certainly will.

Both are at a very good price at the moment and, with a new distributor ready to do their thing, you should try one out as soon as you can. 

Blade RH-4 Classic

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Blade Durango Deluxe DD-2

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

The rivals

BLADE DD-2	
Gibson LP Doublecut Plus	£1,699
Schecter S-1	
30th Anniversary	£699
PRS Custom SE	£595

The DC range allows for that classic Les Paul tone with lighter weight and just two controls to regulate the pair of 490-series alnico humbuckers. A pair of Seymour Duncan SH-5 Custom humbuckers, a small-yet-perfectly formed body and a great neck made the Schecter S-1 our stone-cold favourite of the recent 30th Anniversary models. The SE Custom features a flame maple veneer over a thin solid maple flat top, twin 'buckers and vibrato. A taste of the real PRS at a fifth of the price.



Blade's back

With Blade now back in our UK stores, and a 20th Anniversary just around the corner, we track down company founder and designer Gary Levinson in his Swiss workshop
Words: Dave Burrluck

Pictured: Gary Levinson has played an important role in guitar innovation

Guitarist: So, Gary, where has Blade been these past couple of years?

Levinson: "It was a situation where our distribution ran into difficulties that kept them from promoting the product properly. As a manufacturer it's important that your product gets the best possible treatment in the countries that it's available. And also that the musicians that honour you by buying your products get the best possible service. With Blade – from high to low – it's a professional-grade instrument and we have a lot of professionals and very, very serious players, they have the right to know that if they need help in terms of service, it's there."

Can you clarify the Swiss connection. Blade guitars aren't made there are they?

"It depends on the model. We manufacture product in Japan, Korea and China. For example, the RH4 is still made in Japan and the DD-2 is made in China. In Switzerland we still have our workshops where we do product development and

prototyping. All the guitars come through here first for a thorough QC by our guys. Every one gets put on the bench and checked thoroughly. Also, we design a lot of proprietary parts – we don't simply use things from someone's parts catalogue and bolt it all together. We plan, design and have made our own pickups, our electronics. We have several bridges that are made exclusively for us."

The first Blade guitar was actually the R4 with three single-coils wasn't it? Was the RH4 an initial option?

"The first R4 that came out in 1988 had true single-coils. The RH4 first appeared in 1989. We specifically decided to do the three single-coil version first because there were a number of new ideas on the guitar like the VSC. We wanted to be able to showcase how you could get so many good sounds from a guitar with three single-coil pickups but not lose any other classic sounds, for example the mixed pickup sounds. You can't get those if the pickups

don't electronically 'see' each other. That's the reason why we've never used active pickups on a Blade. The VSC is an enhancement mechanism and sits behind the five-position switch: the pickups always react to one another in the classic way which gives you those resonant peak shifts that allow you to get those classic sounds.

"We've made a lot of changes along the way. We've always prided ourselves on constant improvement. I consider myself a toolmaker: making tools for musicians as opposed to furniture. One of the things you have to be able to do is to relate to changes that happen in musical styles. Hence the changes to the VSC over the years, but only where we feel we need.

"We've kept the midrange boost the same for that nice, nosey, creamy distortion sound. We've lowered the treble boost centre and instead of being -4 to +12dB cut/boost it's 0-10dB boost. One reason for that is that with the original VSC the music world had a tendency to go for more 'glassy' highs with a little more bite – that →



→ late-eighties, early nineties sound. Now the boost is a little more bell-like, a little more reminiscent of a Tele or a Gretsch. The bass boost is the same as it's always been but it's more efficient now and it's also 0-10db boost. Each guitar we make has pickups that are spec'd for what the final sound should be and how that works with the VSC. We normally evaluate this with three amps – Marshall, Boogie and Fender for crunch, cream and clean sounds. You'll find the VSC guide on the website www.bladeguitars.com/downloads.html."

The Falcon is an unusual vibrato with two blocks. Can you outline the principle behind it?

"The background was to have a vibrato that would allow you to get the classic vintage type of sound of a fulcrum vibrato but still have as much versatility as the more modern vibratos like Floyd Roses and Wilkinsons. Basically speaking we wanted the up-bend possibilities but without the disadvantages of the floating vibrato: if you break a string you're out of tune, or if you bend a string, which changes the tension, all the other strings go out of tune so you couldn't play bent strings against open strings or those pedal steel bends. So we were really trying to do three things: have tuning stability, maintain the tonal integrity of a fulcrum vibrato but also with versatility of a floating vibrato. That was the design concept behind the Falcon vibrato and I think we pretty much got it right. We still make it the same way now."

The Durango DD-2 is the newest guitar in your range. What's the idea behind that?

"We've made a couple of excursions into this area before. The first was the Durango-T which was also a set neck mahogany body guitar but with two P-90s. That instrument didn't strike a nerve. We wanted to provide a darker sound and we wanted to have a 24.75-inch scale length. So many musicians I've known over the years just aren't happy with the higher-tension feel of the 25.5-inch scale. They like the softness that you get from a shorter scale. Also the scale length affects the development of your harmonic overtones along with things like the wood.

"So we wanted to go into this area but hadn't really found the right vehicle. One afternoon in the workshop I just carved a top on a Durango Standard and thought it was neat. It's a relatively small body, it's lighter and easier to handle – more like a Les Paul Jr or Melody Maker, real comfortable little guitar to play."

When did you introduce the original Durango, now called the Durango Standard?

"I think it was 1993, maybe mid-1994. You and I were sitting in your living room and



The Durango sees Blade moving into pastures new

"We've always prided ourselves on constant improvement. I consider myself a toolmaker – making tools for musicians as opposed to furniture"

we were talking about a couple of things and the Durango came from that. It was one of those 'draw a design on a napkin' things. I got back to the workshop and started playing around with it and came up with the modified Thinline-type of pickguard, and the Durango was born."

How do the pickups, the LHN-5B & 5N, differ from the LH-55?

"The LHN-5 is virtually identical to the LH-55. It's got a couple more windings on it to give a little bit fatter sound without over-winding it at all. On the DD-1, that's got the LHN-4, a more over-wound pickup. It gives a different bass response, a little grungier, a little more basic, in-ya-face sound. They all use alnico magnets. So the LHN-5 is more vintage, classic sound but with a little more midrange because we've opted to have the thinner body on this series."

Is the TOB-16 bridge is Gotoh-made?

"No. We'd got a new prototype from Trev Wilkinson and that was on the original DD-2 in Frankfurt a year and a half ago. But we weren't happy with it, it was just a bit too massive. If you've got too much bridge on it, it just changes the tonal

response and starts to enhance the midrange too much. So with this bridge we wanted it to be reasonably light, I didn't want to lose all the top end but I also wanted something that looked good. So we redesigned the bridge and it's now made exclusively for Blade."

Unbelievably, it's the 20th Anniversary of Blade next year? Do you have any special plans to mark that?

L: "In January 2007 we'll introduce the Durango Custom, the DC-2. That's Japanese made and there'll be two versions. It's got a mahogany body but with a high-grade figured maple top, a 20mm cap. As I said, it'll have a nitro-cellulose finish. It'll have LHN-6 humbuckers wound with thinner gauge wire and have more output and more upper midrange giving it a little more presence. It'll be a full thickness body, more like the depth of a Les Paul. But because it's got a deeper top carve it won't look as big. Then we're coming out with another, more unusual instrument. It'll be built the same way but with an ash top which will give you a little more bite. You remember the silver streak finishes we did? We're gonna do that!" 