

BLACKSTAR HT STAGE 60 2 X 12 COMBO & STAGE 100 HEAD £699 & £599
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



Blackstar HT Stage 100 head & HT Stage 60 2 x 12 combo £699 & £599

Guitarist CHOICE

As we noted last issue, Blackstar's HT Venue range is set to make a big impression. We check out the two biggest and loudest models available... **by Nick Guppy**

There's no tougher market to be in if you're an amp manufacturer than the closely fought mid-price area, where great tone is often overlooked as makers struggle to square the cost-divided-by-features calculation. However, Blackstar's recently released HT Venue range has managed to raise the bar for tonal excellence in this bracket, with a selection of good-looking and well-made combos and heads to cater for just about every need. Recently we looked at the 20- and 45-watt models; this month we're looking at the more pro-targeted, fully-featured HT Stage 60 combo and HT Stage 100 head.

Both the combo and head are built to Blackstar's now familiar high standard of craftsmanship – with tough ply cabinets expertly covered in a slick satin black vinyl. The HT Venue range's cool retro-modern styling is set off by a smart gold fleck speaker grille cloth, gold piping and chunky jazz bass-style control knobs. Both amps look smart, purposeful and way more expensive than their price tag might suggest. The electronics are supported by a

tough steel open-ended tray chassis with folded edges to improve rigidity. One main PCB holds most of the circuitry, including the front panel controls, preamp valve bases and a variety of conventional and surface mount components; there are other boards for the output valves, rear panel sockets and mains input. Everything is supported on metal standoffs, looking robust and easily capable of standing up to a tough gigging life. As

with many amps of this type, the board-mounted preamp valve bases mean the valves themselves are deeply recessed, making them tricky to remove and replace on the fly. Due to Blackstar's market-busting build standard and their oversized transformers, both

amps are weighty items – thankfully, the combo has a pair of side handles making it easier to lift and carry.

Both Stage amps have full-width control panels with expanded features compared to the range's entry models. The clean channel has controls for volume, bass and treble, while the overdrive channel has two different voices called OD1 and OD2 with separate gain and volume controls and a shared EQ that features Blackstar's clever ISF (Infinite Shape Feature), continuously varying the EQ between UK and American configuration. All three modes have a separate voice switch that can provide subtle or quite dramatic shifts in tone depending how the EQ is set, providing a total of six distinct sounds. The master section also has its own EQ controls for presence and depth, along with a single global volume control and a level knob for the built-in digital reverb.

On the rear panel there's a comprehensive selection of speaker outlets, an emulated recording output with two presets to approximate the tone of a 4 x 12 or 1 x 12 cabinet, a series effects loop with switchable levels and a cool tone switch for the Stage's digital reverb, which can be set to light or dark, making it easy to get either the crashier sound of a reverb spring or a warmer

Both the combo and head are built to Blackstar's now familiar high standard of craftsmanship



The onboard digital reverb is simple but effective

studio reverb with a smooth decay. There's also a pair of footswitch sockets – one nine-pin D-sub for the supplied FS-7 unit, which toggles the three basic channels plus reverb, and a jack socket for an optional FS-4 footswitch, which can be used to trigger the voice switch setting for OD2.

Sounds

Both the combo and head deliver the same quality sounds

The Rivals

Peavey's **Valve King 2 x 12 combo** (£439) may not have as many features as the Blackstar, but there's a few cool tweaks and it sounds great for the money. Same goes for **Marshall's MA100 head** (£531), which features two channels, but with a somewhat clanky spring reverb. If you want a more vintage appearance, then consider the new **Vox AC30C2** (£699), which has the look of a classic AC30 with surprisingly good tone.

The Stage 60 is highly versatile with a rich, open and airy feel to its clean channel, which can be pushed into a very responsive bluesy overdrive at higher volume settings

we've already heard from the rest of the HT Venue range, but with more power and authority. The Stage 60 combo proves to be highly versatile with a rich, open and airy feel to its clean channel in boutique mode,

which can be pushed into a very responsive bluesy overdrive at higher volume settings, aided by the power amp automatically reconfiguring itself to class A operation. For more headroom, just swap to the modern voice

setting, this puts the output stage into class AB mode with increased damping for a bold, punchy tone with plenty of snap to the bottom strings.

Both overdrive channels sound superb, with all the sustain and filth that we've come to expect from Blackstar amp. OD1 has slightly less gain and is better suited to classic rock/blues while OD2 is better for modern lead styles. The two voice switches have quite different effects: on OD1, the bass is lifted and the power amp damping reduced for a livelier and more responsive feel, while on OD2 the voice switch adds a significant midrange boost for a smoother tone that's ideally suited for ballad solos. It's a very easy amp to dial-in, with smooth interactive tone controls and that very clever ISF knob, which can subtly shift the Stage from British to American response.



The HT series continues Blackstar's good reputation for design and build quality



The two overdrive voices offer plenty of tonal variation

There's plenty of volume available – the combo will drown out most drummers before it arrives at the halfway mark

Also good is the Stage's smooth digital reverb – the simple but effective tone switch on the rear panel makes this a proper effect that can really enhance the amp's core sounds.

As you'd expect, the 100-watt Stage head delivers more of the same with identical controls and features, although if you use a 4 x 12 it will impart a slightly woodier, mid-biased tone than that of the ported 2 x 12 combo. There's plenty of volume available from both combo and head – the combo will drown out most drummers before it arrives at the halfway mark, while the 100-watt head, through a 4 x 12, has that classic thump effect as it moves the air. As with all Blackstars, there's no annoying high frequency fizz, which often afflicts high-gain circuits, making for a natural sounding tone that's very rewarding to play. The speaker-emulated recording output sounds great and works equally well plugged into a PA – a great time-saver compared to using a mic.

Verdict

Something that's common throughout the Blackstar range is the way you can compare

these amps favourably to products that cost two or even three times as much to buy. Yes, there's plenty of competition in this price bracket, however, both the combo and head offer superb craftsmanship and solid robust electronics, combined with tone and feature set that could give several boutique manufacturers a hard time.

Aimed at hard-working amateurs or semi-pros, but with the look, feel and reliability of top-flight pro equipment, we reckon the Stage amplifiers are likely to become the HT Venue range's most popular products. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Design, build, sounds and price

We dislike: The preamp valves will be tricky to replace in a hurry

Guitarist says: Two more excellent mid-priced amps that can easily cut it at the pro standard and confirm Blackstar's long overdue arrival as a serious world player in the amp market



Blackstar HT Stage 100 Head

PRICE: £599
ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Hybrid two-channel amp with solid-state rectification
OUTPUT: 100 watts RMS
VALVES: 2 x ECC83/12AX7, 1 x ECC82/12AU7 preamp, 4 x EL34 power amp
DIMENSIONS: 313 (h) x 670 (w) x 263mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 21/42
CABINET: 15mm ply
CHANNELS: Three
CONTROLS: Clean channel: volume, bass treble; OD1 volume and gain; OD2 volume and gain, bass, mid, treble. ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control, master volume, reverb level, presence, depth
FOOTSWITCH: FS7, changes channels, toggles reverb
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series effects loop with switchable levels, speaker-emulated recording output
OPTIONS: FS4 Footswitch toggles voice setting for OD2
RANGE OPTIONS: See Stage 60
Blackstar Amplification
info@blackstaramps.com
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Test results

| | |
|-----------------|-------|
| Build quality | ★★★★★ |
| Features | ★★★★★ |
| Sound | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money | ★★★★★ |

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Blackstar HT Stage 60 2x12 combo

PRICE: £699
ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Hybrid two-channel amp with solid-state rectification
OUTPUT: 60 watts RMS
VALVES: 2 x ECC83/12AX7, 1 x ECC82/12AU7 preamp, 2 x EL34 power amp
DIMENSIONS: 586 (h) x 715 (w) x 278mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 30/66
CABINET: 15mm ply
LOUDSPEAKERS: Two Celestion Rocket G12s
CHANNELS: Three
CONTROLS: Clean channel: volume, bass treble; OD1 volume and gain; OD2 volume and gain, bass, mid, treble. ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control, master volume, reverb level, presence, depth
FOOTSWITCH: FS7, changes channels, toggles reverb
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series effects loop with switchable levels, speaker-emulated recording output
OPTIONS: FS4 Footswitch toggles voice setting for OD2
RANGE OPTIONS: The HT Studio 20 combo is £449 and the head version, the HT Studio 20H, is £379. The HT Club 40 1 x 12 combo is £549; the more powerful Soloist 60 1 x 12 combo costs £649. The Stage 100 head is £599. There's a 1 x 12 extension cabinet for £159, a 2 x 12 that matches the Stage 60 for £249 and angled and straight 4 x 12s cost just £349



Test results

| | |
|-----------------|-------|
| Build quality | ★★★★★ |
| Features | ★★★★★ |
| Sound | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money | ★★★★★ |

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★