



Shining Stars

Far from just a cosmetic touch-up, Blackstar's best-selling valve range gets a mighty makeover both inside and out – with seriously impressive results

Words Nick Guppy Photography Olly Curtis



BLACKSTAR HT VENUE MARK II CLUB 40 COMBO AND STAGE 100 HEAD

£699 & £749

What You Need To Know

- 1 Haven't we seen these before?**
Yes, and no! The new HT Venue MkII range is a substantial redesign of the original MkI amps, which have become well-known for their rugged reliability and 'get the job done' features. Our review models are both hybrid designs.
- 2 So, same as the old ones with a new lick of paint?**
Not at all. The new range represents over three years of painstaking R&D. It's far from just a cosmetic overhaul.
- 3 So what's new?**
A lot... from the cabinet and logo dimensions to a completely redesigned in-house digital reverb. The Clean channels' voicing have been re-worked, plus there's a new power reduction feature which drops the output down to around 10 per cent of full power.

For any manufacturer, replacing or updating the most popular item in your catalogue is a brave decision and for every success story there are many failures. The temptation to try fixing something that isn't broken must be huge. However, Blackstar Amplification has never been the kind of company to rest on its laurels and so after nearly three years of intense research and development, we're taking our first look at the replacement for Blackstar's best-selling HT Venue series, the all-new HT Venue Mark II, with a focus on the entry-level Club 40 112 combo and the Stage 100 Head.

The revisions are far from superficial; every aspect of the HT Venue design has been painstakingly explored, from the cabinet and logo dimensions to a completely redesigned in-house digital reverb. Although the new amps look reassuringly familiar, there are many improvements, some more obvious than others.

Both the combo and head are smartly presented in the new HT Venue livery of textured black vinyl with a silver on black grill cloth, separated by a subtle silver piping detail. The combo's dimensions have been slightly increased to enhance bass response, while the logo badge has been slightly downscaled.

One thing that hasn't been changed though, is the well-known letterbox format with its front-facing control panel. Anyone familiar with the old HT Venue will feel instantly at home with the new visuals.

Under the hood, the Venue is still a hybrid design, using solid state technology mixed with valves in the preamp, combined with a punchy EL34-powered output stage. The electronics live on a high quality through-plated printed circuit board, which has been laid out in an elegantly economic way that will help minimise noise. The quality and attention to detail matches or exceeds products costing double or even triple the price, and exists right down to design level;





1. The voice switches add an extra sound for each channel; and now on the MkII amps they're also footswitchable
2. The new power reduction feature provides a low output option that's 10 percent of full power – for example four watts on the HT Club 40, or 10 watts on the Stage 100 head



for example, the standby mode biases the power valves to 'off', rather than simply cutting the plate voltage, to eliminate something called 'cathode poisoning', which can happen if a valve amp is left in standby mode for long periods of time.

The HT Club 40 combo is a proper two-channel design, with two footswitchable voices on each channel. The Clean channel's voicings have been extensively re-worked and offer two sounds best described as American clean and British clean, with volume, bass and treble controls. Blackstar describes the Overdrive channel's two voices as 'super crunch'

and 'super saturated lead', with gain and volume controls together with Blackstar's familiar, patented, ISF control which progressively shifts the EQ from USA to UK characteristics, leaving all the tone controls fully operational and significantly increasing tonal range. Changing voices on either channel is a deceptively simple push-button click, either from the front panel or the footswitch, which causes various parameters to change simultaneously, from preamp EQ and gain structure to power amplifier negative feedback. There's a new power reduction switch too, which drops the output down to around 10 per cent of full power.

There are just a couple of global controls on the front panel: a master volume and a level control for the Club 40's digital reverb. This has been considerably updated, with a new in-house design that offers a bright plate or a darker room voice, selectable from a switch on the rear panel.

The electronics live on a high quality circuit board, which has been laid out in an elegantly economic way to minimise noise



3. The speaker-emulated line outs on the rear panel offer a choice of two cabinet voicings

4. Despite their weighty sound the amps are the ideal size to be carried around on tour

5. The subtly altered Blackstar logo (it's slightly smaller) sits on front of one of the most versatile and affordable amp ranges in the world

6. The EL34s are perfect for a range of styles and are ideal for delivering a powerful punch on big stages

The rear panel also features a trio of speaker jacks, speaker-emulated line outs on jack and balanced XLR with two cabinet EQ settings, USB audio in/out, and a series effects loop with switchable levels. We get two footswitch jacks for the supplied two-button unit that changes channels and voices, for the optional FS-14 controller.

The Stage 100 Head benefits from a bigger feature set, with separate clean, OD1 and OD2 channels making for six voices, which are all footswitchable. There are separate gain and volume controls for all three channels, with the Overdrive EQ section shared by OD1 and OD2, and an enhanced master section that includes controls for presence and resonance as well as volume and reverb level. Its rear panel is like the Club 40, except there are five speaker outlets covering all popular cabinet hook-up requirements.

Overall, these new Venues are stylish, good-looking amps that will suit any backline, while being restrained and subtle enough to blend into venues that aren't so gear-friendly. There's substance to go with the style too, with robust construction and

high-quality electronics that will cope with any gig schedule.

Sounds

We tried out both amps with our Duncan Alnico-loaded Strat and a PAF-equipped Les Paul Standard. Both fire up quietly and smoothly, with practically zero hum and hiss, indicating a well-sorted circuit.

The two clean voices are superb, channelling the snappy treble and tight bass of vintage American blackface alongside a looser and livelier AC30 vibe that's superb for nearly-clean blues and country styles. The Super crunch and lead tones of the Club 40 take care of any overdrive need, from mild, bluesy distortion that's just a

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shade more aggressive than cranking the clean channel, to a pretty wild crunch that sounds great with single coils but is superb for classic rock and blues with a beefy Les Paul. The higher gain overdrive voice is thicker but no less defined, ideal for rock ballad solos and modern rock/metal leads.

Blackstar's patented ISF EQ control is unique; at the USA end of the scale the bass is rounder and the treble more extended, while at the other the midrange becomes more prominent. The relationship between bass, mid and treble also shifts, providing a considerably extended range from a traditional passive EQ section, from subtle shifts in colour to quite pronounced differences. Impressively, all the tonal range is perfectly balanced and usable – there's no piercing treble or flabby bass. If you start by putting all the tone controls at the halfway stage you'll probably have an ideal sound.

The Stage 100's extended feature set has two rich and responsive overdrive channels that go from classic, slightly compressed tones to modern sounds on the alternative channel voices, which are looser and more open with reduced power amp damping.

Being able to footswitch the voices makes the new Venues much more flexible, and clever logic inside means the amps remember the voice setting when you change channels. The optional FS-14 five-button controller adds extra functionality for selecting Clean, OD1 and OD2 channels, a global boost and reverb on/off. You can select the alternative voice for each channel by tapping the channel select footswitch twice, with the LED indicators changing colour to remind you which is selected. The Venues can also be put into a remote switching mode, making them compatible with multi-effects with that function.

The new in-house Blackstar digital reverb is superb, adding a sweet shimmer to highs in plate mode, or a warm earthy halo in room mode that's perfect for jazz and fusion. Likewise, the reworked EQs are even better than before, with plenty of range and no nasty peaks, making it easy to dial in any guitar for optimum tone, especially on the overdrive channels. Live, it's satisfying to hear the Club 40 cut through without any unwanted treble fizz and plenty of headroom on tap, while the

THE RIVALS



PEAVEY CLASSIC 30 £829

Peavey's long-running Classic range is aimed at the working player and there's a choice of heads and combos to suit most tonal and gigging needs. The Classic 30 retails around £829 but if you shop around you'll find it for under £700.

<https://peavey.com>



FENDER HOT ROD DELUXE £799

Fender's Hot Rod Deluxe is now in its MkIII incarnation yet still going strong and offers a more vintage approach. It retails for around £799, however, there are competitive deals if you shop around.

<https://shop.fender.com>



PRS SONZERA 50 £879

If you're after something more contemporary then check out PRS's Sonzera 50 1x12 combo, which can be found for around £799. Marshall's DSL100H is still the go-to head for many players, with modern electronics and an affordable price thanks to offshore manufacturing.

www.prguitars.com



7. The Stage 100's OD1 and OD2 drive channels feature separate gain and volume controls for much-improved flexibility

effortless punch of the Stage 100's four EL34s is ideal for big stages, especially with a 4x12.

Verdict

These new, improved HT Venue MkII amps have certainly passed our test with flying colours. Blackstar's no-nonsense approach with logically-arranged controls that work and do what they say they do is still there, enhanced with increased flexibility and superb tones that rival boutique designs costing two or even three times the price.

The new power reduction feature makes them just as useful in the studio, while the speaker-emulated line out on XLR is great for live work and dispenses with mic positioning that can make or break your stage tone. USB compatibility is another useful option that many home recordists will appreciate, with simultaneous stereo, preamp and dry guitar outputs and a stereo line input.

But the icing on the cake is the superb Blackstar-designed digital reverb, with two voices that rival top-dollar studio products and sound superb with all guitar-types. There's no doubt Blackstar's tone wizards have excelled themselves here, and with carefully-calculated pricing we won't be surprised to see this new HT Venue range dominate the ultra-competitive mid-price valve amp market for a some time to come. **G**



BLACKSTAR HT VENUE MARK II CLUB 40 COMBO

PRICE: £699

ORIGIN: Designed in the UK, made under licence in China

TYPE: Hybrid preamp and valve power amp

OUTPUT: 40 watts RMS switchable to 4 watts RMS

VALVES: 2 x 12AX7, 2 x EL34

DIMENSIONS: 533(w) x 575 (h) x 278mm(d)

WEIGHT (KG/LB): 24/53

CABINET: Birch ply

LOUDSPEAKER: 1 x 12" Celestion G12 Seventy 80

CHANNELS: Two, both with two footswitchable voices

CONTROLS: Clean channel: Volume, bass, treble, voice switch. Overdrive channel: gain, volume, bass, mid, treble, ISF, voice switch. Global reverb level, power reduction switch and master volume. Speaker emulation cab select, effects loop level select

FOOTSWITCH: Two-button footswitch operates channel/voice select

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series effects loop, digital reverb with two models, 10 percent power reduction feature

OPTIONS: The five-button FS-14 range controller is £69

RANGE OPTIONS: HT Stage 60 112 MkII (£749), Stage 60 212 MkII (£849)

Blackstar Amplification
01604 817817
www.blackstaramps.com



Pros: Top quality tones that rival expensive rivals, superb reverb

Cons: A mild annoyance: the effects loop can't be foot-switched



BLACKSTAR HT VENUE MARK II STAGE 100 HEAD

PRICE: £749

ORIGIN: Designed in the UK, made under licence in China

TYPE: Hybrid preamp and valve power amp

OUTPUT: 100 watts RMS switchable to 10 watts RMS

VALVES: 2 x 12AX7, 4 x EL34

DIMENSIONS: 591 (w) x 245 (h) x 225 (d)

WEIGHT (KG/LB): 18/40

CABINET: Birch ply

CHANNELS: Three, each with two footswitchable voices

CONTROLS: Clean channel: Volume, bass, treble, voice switch. Overdrive channels: OD1 gain, volume, voice switch, OD2 gain, volume, voice switch. Bass, mid, treble, ISF, voice switch. Global reverb level, power reduction switch, presence, resonance and master volume. Speaker emulation cab select, effects loop level select

FOOTSWITCH: Two-button foot switch operates channel/voice select

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series effects loop, digital reverb with two models, 10 percent power reduction feature

OPTIONS: The five-button FS-14 foot-controller is £69

RANGE OPTIONS: The HT Club 50H MkII head is £599, while the HT Stage 100H MkII head is £749. There's a range of matching extension cabinets, from the HTV112 at £199, to angled and straight 4x12s at a very reasonable £479



Pros: Superb tones, great high-headroom cleans

Cons: As with the HT Club 40, you can't switch the effects loop in/out