

BLACKSTAR HT STUDIO 20 HEAD & HT CLUB 40 1 x 12 COMBO £379 & £549  
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



Guitarist  
CHOICE

# Blackstar HT Studio 20 head & HT Club 40 1 x 12 combo £379 & £549

With stellar tone and smart prices, the HT Venues are about to shake up the mid-price market... **by Nick Guppy**

**B**lackstar's continued march towards world domination in the guitar amplification market has seen the release of some seriously good amps at very affordable prices. It started with its delectable hand-wired range and was followed by such gems as the Gold Award-winning Series One 45-watt combo and the awesome little HT-5 head, which we predicted would be a runaway success and apparently still sells faster than Blackstar can make 'em – it's an enviable situation to be in under current market conditions. Now it's time for Blackstar to address the highly competitive mid-priced market: enter the new HT Venue range. Making its debut at this year's NAMM show, the HT Venue amps are intended to give the working musician maximum bang for buck. This month we take a look at the two entry-point models: the HT Studio head and the Club 40 1 x 12 combo.

Like all the Blackstar products we've seen so far, the head, combo and their matching extension cabinets are superbly crafted. The satin

black-finish vinyl covering is applied without any cuts in the corners, something that many amp builders seem incapable of. It looks impressive and although the HT Venue range's styling may seem a little utilitarian at first glance, the attention to detail lifts it above the competition.

The electronics are held on a robust PCB, which is adequately protected inside a tough steel chassis and holds practically all front and rear panel components. There's particular attention to detail in the layout and component choice that leaves you in no doubt about Blackstar's devotion to getting every last aspect right. The overall impression is one of reliable capability – these are amps that should thrive in the unforgiving world of club gigging and will easily handle being chucked in a car boot night after night without losing their good looks.

Both the head and combo are two-channel designs with separate EQ controls and digital reverb. There are controls for volume and tone on the clean channel, with a

familiar gain and volume arrangement on the overdrive channel. The overdrive channel's EQ combines bass, mid and treble controls with Blackstar's now-familiar ISF

## The Rivals

**Marshall's MHZ15 Haze 15 head** (£448) is 6V6-powered and features a quartet of vintage-voiced effects and all the appeal that goes with mini-stacks – and at a very competitive price. **Vox's VT50 Valvetronix 50W combo** (£258) offers incredible tone at such a low price point. The patented Valve Reactor system really works to add the warmth and punch of a valve output stage. Excellent value for money. **Peavey's Valve King 112 50W combo** (£421) manages to sound good and look cool as well as throwing in a few very 'boutique' features at a bargain basement price. Definitely worth a shot if you're after real valve tone on a budget.

(Infinite Shape Feature). This disarmingly simple control sweeps you from a typical American tone to a more Brit-influenced sound, with every conceivable point in between. Originally developed as a tool to help Blackstar's R&D team dial in amps for artist customers, it proved so popular and easy to use that it's now a permanent fixture in many Blackstar



The control panels are clear and well laid out





The HT series has the feel of meticulous design and gig-ready build

designs. Topping off the front panel are master controls for volume and reverb.

Around the back there are sockets for the integral series effects loop – with a useful level switch that accepts stompbox-type pedals or semi-pro rack units – and a speaker-emulated recording output.

That's the deal on the 20-watter, but the Club 40

combo's capabilities are considerably expanded with the addition of a pair of voice switches for the clean and overdrive channels and a handy tone switch for the built-in digital reverb. Both amps are footswitchable – the 20-watt head has a simple one-button switch for swapping channels, while you can also toggle the reverb on or off on the Club 40.

The clean channel on the HT20H is very responsive and can be pushed into a bluesy mild overdrive that sounds great with a touch of reverb

The recording output is very clean as far as noise is concerned and makes it easy to get a good 'real' amp tone onto your PC or portastudio with a minimum of fuss.

### Sounds

Both the HT20H head and Club 40 combo use EL34 output valves and Celestion speakers, which should give you an idea of what tonal ballpark these amps sit in.

The HT20H head's cathode-biased output stage delivers 20 watts and can be used with a variety of extension cabinets. The clean channel on this amp is very responsive and can be pushed into a bluesy mild overdrive that sounds great with a touch of reverb. For more serious drive effects, the overdrive channel is capable of covering everything from mild

crunch to massive sustain, with an aggressive but not overly vicious edge that can be accented or tamed to a greater or lesser extent by the Infinite Shape control.

The Club 40's clean channel voice switches preamp gain, voicing and power amp damping to give Class A performance in 'boutique' mode, with shimmering cleans that can be wound up into a very tasty chiming effect. In 'modern' mode, the power amp is reconfigured to Class AB for extra clarity and a tight, snappy bottom end. The overdrive channel's voice switch swaps between a tight, crunchy overdrive to one with a much fatter mid-range and less power amp damping for a completely different response that's looser and much more dynamic. The simple 'reverb tone' switch on





The HT Club 40 combo is the ideal tool for small gigs

Both amps have plenty of volume for gigging, even if the head has more potential as a recording tool

the Club 40's rear panel provides either a bright, zingy decay or a darker and warmer effect, making it easy to achieve authentic vintage surf and sixties sounds, through to more modern fusion tones. As with the HT20H, the Club 40 packs an enormous amount of tone into an unassuming layout that makes it a real pleasure to use.

Both amps have plenty of volume for gigging, even if the 20-watt head has more potential as a recording tool. However, if you pair the HT20H with a 2 x 12 cabinet it copes easily with a loud drummer, making this – or a pair of 1 x 12 cabs – an ideal and portable rig for small gigs.

### Verdict

Blackstar's HT Venue range is a big hit with us so far; we're more than a little surprised at just how flexible and responsive both the Studio and Club amps are, yet both are blessed with straightforward controls that make them simple and intuitive to use. Full marks for the clever voice switches on

the Club, too, which do exactly what they say and make for a very rewarding sonic experience that you don't often find, even on amps costing over £1,000. They're ideal for enthusiastic semi-pro and amateur use and should last for absolutely ages.

In this very competitive price bracket there's a lot of very worthy competition that's fighting hard for your money and the Blackstars are not the cheapest products out there. They are, however, among the very best. **G**

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Excellent tone; flexibility to cover a wide range of styles from a simple control layout

**We dislike:** Hard to find fault with either amp at the price

**Guitarist says:** The HT Venue series has sets a benchmark for affordable performance. Plug in as soon as you can



### Blackstar HT Studio 20 head

**PRICE:** £379  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Hybrid two-channel amp with solid-state rectification  
**OUTPUT:** 20 watts RMS  
**VALVES:** 2 x ECC83/12AX7 preamp, 2 x EL34 power amp  
**DIMENSIONS:** 288 (h) x 517 (w) x 274mm (d)  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 13/29  
**CABINET:** 15mm ply  
**CHANNELS:** Two  
**CONTROLS:** Clean channel: volume and tone. Overdrive channel: volume, gain, bass, mid, treble. ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control, master volume, reverb level  
**FOOTSWITCH:** FS4 – switches channels only  
**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Series effects loop with switchable levels, speaker-emulated recording/headphones line out  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The HT Studio 20 combo is £449, the HT Club 40 combo, as reviewed, is £549. The Soloist 60 112 combo is £649 while the 212 Stage 60 costs £699. There's also a 100-watt head, the Stage 100 (£599). The range is topped off by 112, 212 and 412 Celestion-loaded extension cabs retailing at £159, £249 and £349 respectively  
**Blackstar Amplification**  
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### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Blackstar HT Club 40 1 x 12 combo

**PRICE:** £549  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Hybrid two-channel, four-mode amp with solid-state rectification  
**OUTPUT:** 40 watts RMS  
**VALVES:** 2 x ECC83/12AX7 preamp, 2 x EL34 power amp  
**DIMENSIONS:** 566 (h) x 619 (w) x 297mm (d)  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 25/55  
**CABINET:** 15mm ply  
**CHANNELS:** Two, each with two modes  
**CONTROLS:** Clean channel: volume, tone and voice switch. Overdrive channel: volume, gain, and voice switch, bass, mid, treble. ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control, master volume and reverb  
**FOOTSWITCH:** FS5 – changes channels and toggles reverb  
**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Series effects loop with switchable levels, speaker-emulated recording output, reverb tone switch  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See the Studio 20 head for details



### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★