

Orange Tiny Terror
Hard Wired Edition

Blackstar HT
Studio 20H

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Group Test

Lunchbox Valve Amp Heads

Where's your head at? If you're hungry for portable valve tone with more bite and less bulk, **tuck into one of these lunchbox models** with Orange, Hayden, Jet City and Blackstar on the menu

WORDS HENRY YATES



Hayden
Mini-MoFo



Jet City
JCA20H

Something's happening in the world of amplifier heads. Take a stroll through a trade show in 2010 and you'll still see the big boys, stacked up like leather breeze blocks, atop monster cabinets, for the delectation of well heeled punters still stuck in the 'big is best' mindset of 70s stadium rock. Increasingly popular, though, are the new breed of so-called lunchbox amps: smaller, lighter and cheaper versions of all-valve heads that run at lower power (usually a maximum of 20 watts), reach their sonic 'sweet spot' at more practical volumes, and hop aboard any cabinet you fancy.

The recent lunchbox craze is widely credited to Orange's Tiny Terror, so for this Group Test, we brought in that model's classy Hard Wired brother (£663). As the

only non-PCB model (ie, it doesn't use a printed circuit board, but features point-to-point hand wiring), there's no doubting the Orange's psychological advantage here, but it will have a fight on its hands against the much cheaper contestants in the test. Such competition comes in the form of Hayden's new Mini-MoFo (£329), Jet City's JCA20H (£319) and Blackstar's HT Studio 20H (£379). To keep things equal, we'll be testing all four heads through the same 2x12 cabinet, and playing *Back In Black* at least once on each. Heads up...

**"LUNCHBOX AMPS ARE
SMALLER, CHEAPER
ALL-VALVE HEADS"**



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



Orange Tiny Terror Hard Wired Edition

£663

Let the juice loose

Power switching
The Terror gives you a choice of 15 or seven-watt output, perfect for every scenario



Size
It's by far the smallest and lightest – and isn't that the whole point of a lunchbox?

Gain
The Terror goes from creamy clean riffs to Class A mayhem at the turn of a dial

The Tiny Terror started it all, and the upgraded version might finish this Group Test. The smallest chassis conceals the most hardcore spec, with ECC83/EL84 valves, hand-wired point-to-point circuitry, and a choice of 15/seven-watt output tailoring the Terror to any context. We'd tell the other amps to go home now... were it not for that non-tiny price tag.

Ear heaven. It's the only way to describe the Tiny Terror's loud, old-fashioned, ever-so-British



valve bark, which belies its housebrick dimensions and sets a sky-high standard for its rivals. With no effects, and only Tone/Gain/Volume controls, it seems sonically limited, but absolutely isn't: you'll start with the full,

responsive, quacky punch of the test's most characterful clean tone, before losing yourself in gritty, tight-bodied distortion that makes rock and blues riffs come alive (you'll need a pedal for hardcore metal). The output selector is also a neat touch – push the Terror into the red, and you'll unlock the test's best 'sweet spot' wherever you are.

Conclusion: Just for a moment, let's pretend money is no object. In this fantasy world, we'd choose the Tiny Terror over the

other three, not just because it sounds like the distillation of rock 'n' roll, but also because its 'carry anywhere' vibe nails the lunchbox concept to perfection. Back to economic reality, though, and we just can't give the nod to an amp that doubles the price demands of its closest rival. It's the best – but not by double.

SUMMARY

For: Heavenly valve tone
Against: Priciest by a mile

★★★★☆

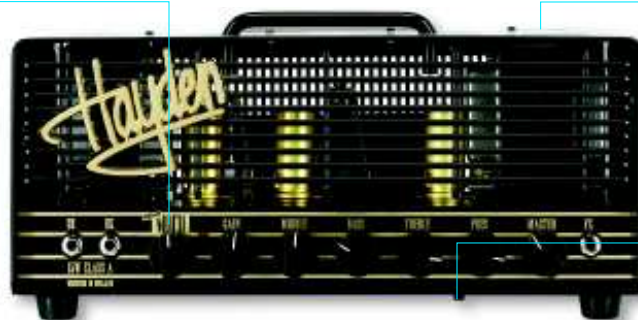
TG says: Pipped to the post

Hayden Mini-MoFo

£329

Head case

Boost
To push your solos over the edge, set the Mini-MoFo boost and hit the footswitch



Build
The Mini-MoFo has a tough steel chassis, perfect for life on the road

Stealth mode
By flicking the switch on the bottom of the amp, you can limit the output to 2 watts

Like *Goodfellas'* Tommy D, this amp's a scaled-down psychopath, packing 15-watt, five-valve grunt in a mean-looking steel chassis, and sweetening the deal with such gig-friendly trimmings as tone-tailoring US/UK inputs and an additional gain stage activated via footswitch. The PCB format and Chinese origin don't scream 'investment!' like the Orange, but the price ain't so crippling either.

The Mini-MoFo feels like a live weapon, rather than a



studio luxury. Built like a tank, with chunky dials, it gives comprehensive command over your tone, even if that tone isn't the strongest in the test. There's a tendency to play woolly, old-

school blues with valve amps, but the MoFo has more attitude: plug into the 'US' input (for more edge than the bassier 'UK'), crank the Presence and Gain, cut the Mid, and you've got the most convincing metal voice in the test, with the 'Mini-MoFo' boost best applied to solos. That said, when you're stroking through clean chords, there's better here.

Conclusion: For £329, you can't really knock the Mini-MoFo: it's as well executed as many British

amps, has a level of tweakability that most valve heads don't, and lives up to the aggression of its name. At the same time, testing it after the Orange can't help but reduce what would otherwise be hands-aloft hysteria to strong approval. This is a damn good amp – but it's all relative.

SUMMARY

For: Price, aggressive tone, features
Against: Lacks some tonal character

★★★★☆

TG says: Good for the rough stuff

At a glance

Orange Tiny Terror Hard Wired Edition

TYPE: Lunchbox valve head
OUTPUT: 15 watts (switchable to 7 watts)
VALVES: 2x ECC83, 2x EL84
CONTROLS: Output select, Volume, Tone, Gain, **SOCKETS:** Guitar input, Speaker outputs
WEIGHT: 5.4kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 155 x 310 x 134mm
CONTACT: Orange 0208 905 2828
WEB: www.orangeamps.com

At a glance

Hayden Mini-MoFo

TYPE: Lunchbox valve head
OUTPUT: 15 watts (switchable to 2 watts)
VALVES: 3x ECC83, 2x EL84
CONTROLS: 'Mini-MoFo', Gain, Treble, Mid, Bass, Presence, Master Volume, **SOCKETS:** US/UK input, FX, Footswitch Speaker Out
WEIGHT: 9kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 168 x 365 x 222mm
CONTACT: Hayden 01245 441155
WEB: www.haydenamps.com

"THE HT STUDIO IS LOUD ENOUGH TO CRACK THE EARTH'S CRUST BUT IT'S GOT DEPTH, BODY AND SOUL, TOO"

LUNCHBOX VALVE HEADS ★ GROUP TEST

Jet City JCA20H £319

The headmaster returns

Gain
The JCA20H starts off creamy, but dial the Gain and you'll see it ain't for jazzers



Controls
Jet City prides itself on simple valve quality – hence the lack trimmings

Valve power
For a competitive £319, you get 20 watts of genuine valve grunt. Bargain, right?

At a glance

Jet City JCA20H

TYPE: Lunchbox valve head
OUTPUT: 20 watts
VALVES: 3x 12ax7, 2x EL84
CONTROLS: Gain, Bass, Middle, Treble, Master, Presence
SOCKETS: Guitar input, Speaker Out
WEIGHT: 9.6kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 239 x 490 x 230mm
CONTACT: Source Distribution 0208 962 5080
WEB: www.jetcityamplification.com

The Jet City motto pledges "100% tube tone, 0% bull****", and given this is the new firm of US amp hero Mike Soldano (TG introduced the brand in last issue), it's a ratio you can believe. In fact, so devoid of bull is the JCA20H that it has "no gimmick features to dilute the signal" and only the bare tone-shaping bones of Volume, Gain, EQ and Presence.

Arrogant in its simplicity and a little heftier than you'd expect from a lunchbox, the JCA20H



quickly sets out its stall as the choice of the valve purist. At 20 watts, this beast has power to burn; as with the MoFo it also has three 12AX7 preamp tubes that are voiced to produce the luxurious cleans and a fat,

swaggering overdrive, which always retain a certain warmth and bottom end, however far you roll the Treble. Jet City says its heads are not made for "smooth jazz", and we'd go along with that. Pushed into the red, this amp runs hot and ballsy, and the response means you'll play harder too.

Conclusion: This test just gets tougher... with another head that would storm the podium were it not for the quality of the competition. Don't expect

the performance of Soldano's boutique models, but there's no doubting the JCA20H is a valve head punching above its price tag, with power and girth (sonic and literal) that means you'd struggle to tell it apart from many full-sizers. It's worth a road test, and maybe more, if you can resist the next contender.

SUMMARY

For: Warm, ballsy tone, power, price
Against: May be too simple for some

★★★★★

TG says: Join the Jet set

Blackstar HT Studio 20H £379

Heads, you win

Reverb
Valve purists don't like effects, but we loved the atmospherics of the reverb

Power
Don't be fooled by the name – the HT Studio has ample power to take on a gig



ISF
Blackstar's 'Infinite Shape Feature' gives massive control over your sonics

At a glance

Blackstar HT Studio 20H

TYPE: Lunchbox valve head
OUTPUT: 20 watts
VALVES: 2x ECC83, 2x EL34
CONTROLS: Power, Reverb, Master Volume, Channel select (OD) EQ, ISF, Volume, Gain, (Clean) Tone, Volume
SOCKETS: Guitar in, Footswitch, Speaker Out, FX Loop, Emulated Out
WEIGHT: 12.8kg
DIMENSIONS: [HxWxD] 288 x 517 x 274mm
CONTACT: Blackstar 01604 652844
WEB: www.blackstaramps.co.uk

Previously regarded as plucky British upstarts, Blackstar is fast becoming the A-listers' choice, with everyone from Opeth to The Gaslight Anthem rolling out the flagship Series One and Artisan. The HT Studio is less swanky, but might break the deadlock in a tough test with twin channels, EL34 valves, its tone-shaping ISF, onboard reverb and a monster 20 watts.

If it had no trimmings, we'd still love the HT Studio. At 20



watts, it's loud enough to crack the earth's crust, but this isn't just a racket. When you play clean, it's got depth, body and soul; add reverb and you've got killer atmospherics; hit the Gain

for a punishing tone with more muscle than the rivals (probably due in part to the EL34s). What really swings it is the flexibility of the ISF (from brittle to booming) and the gig-friendly option of stomping between dedicated channels, cementing the impression of an amp that's sweet enough for the studio, but practical enough for the road.

Conclusion: No, we haven't backtracked on the Orange: it still has the sweetest valve tone

in this test. But our decision is based on the bigger picture, and having chewed over the ratio of thrills given to pounds spent, the top spot goes to the Blackstar. For £379, this is a bulletproof head, with buckets of tweakable tone, imaginative features – and no obvious weak points.

SUMMARY

For: Excellent, rounded performance
Against: Money aside, TT has an edge

★★★★★

TG says: This head kicks ass!