

Blackstar HT Club 40 Amp Review

Max Mobley
April 22, 2010



UK-based Blackstar Amplification has been making big, loud waves with their recent entry into the US market. For a small company, their product line is fairly diverse—products range from their hand-crafted Artisan Series, the big and bold Series One amplifiers and their highly popular (at least in Europe) and somewhat pricey HT tube pedals to their affordable, but feature-rich, HT Venue series combo amps. Of the Venue series, Blackstar sent us the HT Club 40 for review. Powered by two ECC83 and two EL34 tubes, it is, by appearances and a glance at the data sheet, your standard mid-range valve combo minus the digital doodads amp makers tend to stuff into products at this price point. Plug in your guitar and tweak a few knobs, and you quickly realize that the Blackstar HT Club 40 is much, much more.

The Essentials

The amp feels and looks rugged and road-ready. The black Tolex is tight and thick for road use; the external hardware is likewise rugged, giving the amp a somewhat vintage look. A 12" Celestion lies under the black and white grille. On the back side you'll find the usual compliment of jacks, including an FX Loop with a +4/-10 dbv switch, speaker-emulated output, and three powered speaker outs: 16 Ohm for the internal Celestion or an external 16 Ohm cab, and two additional powered outs that can be used with a single 8 Ohm cab (without the internal speaker), two 16 Ohm cabs, or one external 16 Ohm cab along with the internal 16 Ohm speaker. There is also a footswitch jack and included two-button footswitch. The amp also worked fine with my standard two-channel footswitch—one switch managed the amp's two channels, the other, reverb on/off. The back panel also has a Light/Dark switch for the amp's digital reverb, which, in my mind, is the right place for such a feature. The Light/Dark switch turns on or off the reverb's high frequency damping, and a single knob on the front panel controls the reverb amount. The speaker portion of the amp is essentially a sealed cabinet, giving the amp lots of focus and spank, and a tightly controlled bottom-end that may border on too tight at lower volumes. Still, I would much rather carry my footswitch and power cable in my gig bag than deal with the flabbiness that can occur with open backs at low and medium output levels.

In the throes of sweaty onstage inspiration, the last thing I want to do is count knobs or worse, study the front panel of a complicated combo before tweaking something that I feel needs it. Blackstar's front panel seems to be built by guitar players with a similar mindset. (The company was founded by former Marshall R&D alum Ian Robinson and Bruce Keir, along with a handful of their colleagues.) And controlling the Blackstar is somewhat reminiscent of controlling classic Marshalls as opposed to today's fancier ones. The HT Club 40's standard amp layout—clean channel, followed by the high-gain/distortion channel, followed by EQ then master out controls is improved by a sensible use of spacing between sections and crystal-clear white-on-black labeling.

Clean and ... Not So Clean

The clean channel has two knobs—volume and tone, and a switch called Voice. The Voice switch is the key to both knobs, switching the clean channel from "Boutique" meaning pure Class A, to "Modern" which is Class A/B. In Boutique Mode, the volume can introduce a dose of overdrive reminiscent of classic Vox amps and approaching the threshold of a classic HiWatt. With the Voice switch in, the sparkly high-end definition of a Class A/B amp is obvious and pristine at any Channel 1 or Master Volume level. The Tone knob controls brightness and has a wide range. To my taste, the amp and my guitars sounded best from 12 o' clock to 9 o'clock.

The next set of knobs is Channel 2's gain and volume controls. While I was impressed with Channel 1's versatility, Channel 2 (overdrive) is what made me covet this amp and come up with excuses as to why I can't send it back to my editors. The distortion is nothing less than gorgeous, colorful, aggressive and equal parts punchy and creamy. To my ears, the distortion sits somewhere between classic Marshall and Mesa/Boogie, and can be managed very effectively using the ISF knob, and, to a lesser degree, Channel 2's Voice switch.

Creamy distortion has become a mainstay tone beyond Heavy and Nu Metal genres, but it often lacks enough punch and definition to cut through a rock band's live mix. Many guitarists attack this problem by turning up (the solution to, and cause of, most live guitar tone issues), which pushes them out of the house PA and can often destroy a good live mix. The HT Club 40's ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) knob lets you dial back in some crunch and bite so instead of an either/or choice of creamy metal distortion or classic hard rock distortion, you can achieve a hybrid of the two. So at virtually any volume and gain level, you are guaranteed clarity and punch. This is where the amp truly shines, and probably why Blackstar's artist roster leans towards heavy metal, punk, and hard rock acts, though not exclusively so.

Blackstar succinctly describes the ISF knob as a tonal shift from American to UK characteristics, or anywhere in between. It works in conjunction with the treble, middle and bass EQ knobs. The relationship between the EQ knobs and the ISF knob means there are nearly endless tone settings and so many sweet spots it may be hard to park on just one (the upside to a simple UI is also its downside—unless you plan on twiddling knobs during your gig, you will just have to pick your tone and try and forget all the other good ones lurking closely by). But it also means every guitarist who owns this amp can have his or her own signature sound that is of very high quality.

I ended up with many Channel 2 tone settings I really liked, but my number one was with the bass EQ nearly wide open, mid EQ around 3 o'clock, the treble backed off to around 4 o'clock, and the ISF knob set to 12 o'clock, giving me plenty of cream on the sustain, but plenty of spank and crunch on the attack. Set this way, I found little reason to scoop out the mids. With everything set so hot, I was impressed with the amp's unobtrusive hiss levels. I kept the aforementioned Overdrive Voice switch off, as it did little for me that the knobs didn't give me with more precision. When engaged, the Overdrive Voice switch adds body and what Blackstar describes as a "smoother overdrive characteristic" by adding some mid-band gain. Maybe I'd be scooping out mids more with this feature engaged. I am used to a big bottom combo, which could explain why I kept the bass knob cranked.

The amp's Channel 2 Gain offers plenty of overdrive saturation at settings just above 12 o'clock. Sustain was everything you wanted at these levels—richly voiced and very live and uncompressed sounding and beautiful feedback was easy to attain and control—even with the gain pushed towards 3 o'clock. At higher gain levels finger and pick noise rose prominently, but was not displeasing. In fact, it made the amp appear loud at practice volume levels.

EQ, Reverb and the Rest

Following the Channel 1 and 2 knobs are the previously mentioned treble, middle and bass equalization knobs. The EQ section only applies to the overdrive channel (channel 2). Depending on your music, pickups, and playing style, the tone requirements between clean and distortion can vary significantly and a separate EQ section for the clean channel would be 'nice to have.' However, if only one of the two channels on your amp is going to have EQ, it had better be the overdrive channel. I did not feel like I was missing out on EQ controls on channel 1, especially when set to Class A, thanks in large part to the HT Club 40's well-tuned cabinet. Again, the sealed back of this amp helps enormously in this regard via focus and upper mid definition. If you need more EQ for your clean tones, EQ stompboxes are common enough and will give you more control than the EQ section of most amps.

The last two knobs are what you'd expect—Reverb and Master Volume. When I listen to Jeff Beck on a song like "Blanket," I think, "Wow, killer reverb." When I dial in reverb on my own, or sometimes when I hear a guitarist use it in a club I think, "What's the deal with the reverb?" It's just so subjective in a live rock and roll environment. With that said, the HT Club 40's reverb is very reverb-y at high settings and less so at low settings. It's obviously digital, and while that's not a slam, if you're looking for a spring reverb, this amp doesn't have one. The Light/Dark switch on the back panel is a smart reverb parameter if you dig 'verb. Channel 1's Class A/B Voice with Reverb switched to Light provided gobs of shimmer without getting strident. When was the last time you heard a 40 watt tube combo amp that wasn't hellah loud for its size? The Blackstar is no exception. It screams plenty loud for most clubs yet sounds great at mic-able levels so that you can get in the house mix. I think that is important since two sets of PA cabinets will do a far better job of saturating the venue space than a lone 12" in a sealed cabinet. There is plenty of headroom so that the Master Volume controls your level and not your tone, which is what all those other knobs are for.

The Final Mojo

The HT Club 40 is packed with tones. The versatility of the clean channel ranges from classic Pete Townshend to sparkly clean, uncolored guitar tones. Its overdrive channel ranges from British or American blues-rock (thanks to the ISF knob) to mega-aggressive distortion and anywhere in between, and even bits of both at the same time. I only wish it had an additional footswitch to go between Channel 1's Class A and Class A/B, which would essentially make this a powerful three-channel (tone-wise) amp. Though the Marshall-pedigreed company is based in the UK, the amp is manufactured in Korea. Even knowing that, its street price of \$699 feels like a typo.

Buy if...

You predominantly play rock or metal guitar, need sensible, not over-the-top versatility in a combo form.

Skip if...

You have a thing about Asian-made amps, you need the classic breakup of a vintage tube amp, you expect onboard digital effects or modeling, or play venues that require a stack instead of a combo.

Rating...

4 / 5