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Features

Gear

Chicago Blues Box Kingston 18 Goin' Back to Chicago...

By: Phil Feser
 Posted On: 2/22/2007



Goin' Back to Chicago...

Controls on the Kingston include High- and Low-gain 1/4" inputs, Volume, Bass and Treble controls, a Bright switch, and a switch for Harmonic Boost, Reverb, as well as the standard power and standby switches. Other notable features include an 18' heavy duty power cord, extra large rubber feet, a 4-ohm external speaker output jack and a slave 1/4" output jack with a padded speaker signal for running into another amp or processor.

Besides sharing the Roadhouse's bullet-proof build, the Kingston has the same cool hot rod aesthetics and vibe. The combination of purple tolex, black piping and handle, salt-and-pepper grillecloth, purple mother of pearl inlay Q-part knobs, and purple jewel light, give it a distinct, well-conceived appearance that commands the popular response, "What a cool looking amp!"

But do those good looks equate to good tone? With our Fender Relic 1960 Strat and PRS McCarty in hand, I set out to see. With the Strat plugged into the high-gain input and the Tone and Volume controls set at straight up 12 o'clock, I discovered a clean, full tone with punchy midrange with just a hint of overdrive if I picked aggressively. Flipping the Bright switch added sizzle to the highs that brought out the Strat's famous bell-like single-coil tones, while the Harmonic Boost switch not only added gain, but a bit of vigor to the amp's entire audio spectrum - highs, mids and lows. The Treble control acted more like a midrange the further I turned it up, adding upper mids, while the Bright switch handled the highs. Like the Roadhouse, the Kingston responds exceedingly well to pick attack and a guitar's volume and tone controls. There was no need to keep going to the amp to tailor my sound - I could do it all at the guitar.

Playing through the PRS humbuckers required dialing bass down a touch, to keep the speaker from bottoming out when driving the amp hard. The absence of a master volume means the Kingston has to be pushed hard to get its max overdrive tones; its 18 watts of output do get loud, but not uncontrollable or unfriendly onstage. Even cranked, with the Harmonic Boost switch on, and attacking pretty hard with my pick, the amp didn't get overly distorted, which means it'll serve up good blues overdrive with focused overtones.

To add more serious sustain and push, we dropped a Home Brew Electronics Power Screamer overdrive pedal into our signal chain. The combination of the PRS, the Power Screamer, and the Kingston produced an outstanding, very musical distortion that maintained note separation and clarity while spewing all the sustain and controllable feedback we wanted. Again, as with the Strat, I could clean up the PRS and soften the tone with just the volume and tone controls on the McCarty, so the lack of a master

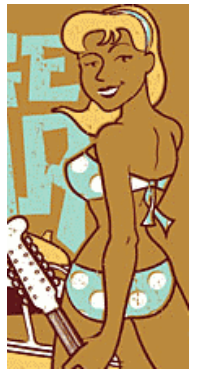


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volume or channel switching isn't a major concern with the Kingston. The tube-driven reverb has a snappy, shimmering sound, though it's equipped with a slightly touchy depth control that could perhaps benefit from a potentiometer with a different taper. Still, the reverb is mere icing on the cake for the Kingston's excellent tone.

The Kingston sounds as good as it looks, and with its straightforward design and rock-solid tone, it's no wonder it and its CBB stablemates are being played by the likes of Ric Hall and his boss, Buddy Guy, as well as Omar Dykes, and Henry Garza of the Los Lonely Boys.

Chicago Blues Box Kingston

Features Hand-wired all-tube circuit with 6L6/6V6/5881/EL34 capability, 18 watts output, spring reverb, Tone Tubby Brown Sound 12" speaker.

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Contact Butler Custom Sound, 770 N. Church Rd, #1, Elmhurst, IL 60126; phone (630) 832-1983; chicagobluesbox.com.

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Red state or blue state, Ginger or Mary Ann, hand-wired or printed-circuit-board amplifiers—all contentious debates that continue to rage with no end in sight. Well, except for the Ginger/Mary Ann thing, because everyone knows Mary Ann is where it's at. But I digress. When it comes to guitar amps, both hand-wired and PC-board schools of construction are valid, as proven by practitioners of the latter such as Soldano and the venerable Diezel—two manufacturers whose stature in the high-end amp world grows by the day. Still, for many guitarists, the art form that is a lovingly assembled, hand-wired amplifier is such a treasure that they're willing to shell out the major bucks that these tone machines cost. The Budda Super Drive 18 and Chicago Blues Box Kingston 30 reviewed here represent the best-of-the-best in their respective construction camps, as they're both exceptionally well built, wicked tone machines. Now maybe guitarists can quit squabbling over which construction method is best and get back to what really matters—playing with some righteous tone. I tested each amp with a Fender Tele, Gibson SG, and PRS McCarty.

Budda Super Drive 18

Sporting a finger-jointed pine cabinet, perfectly applied black Tolex, and a purple control panel adorned with chicken-head knobs, the Super Drive 18 simmers with a vibey, understated elegance. Inside the aluminum chassis is one motherboard that grips the majority of the Super Drive's cathode-biased circuit, including the pots, jacks, and preamp tube sockets. The ceramic power and rectifier tube sockets are chassis-mounted, however. The front panel offers Master Volume, Bass, Treble, Midrange, Drive, and Rhythm Volume controls. The Midrange control also has a Pull/Modern option that scoops the midrange ever so slightly, and the Rhythm Volume control offers a Pull Bright function to add some pearly sparkle.

Zen Tones

Plugging a PRS McCarty into the Super Drive 18, it was quickly obvious that this Budda walks the path of aggressive, meat-eating tones to attain its version of supreme enlightenment. For 18 watts, this sucker is loud, punchy, and big sounding, with nary a flubby low note to be found, even when running full-up. The Clean channel's tones exhibit a bountiful zing with both the PRS and Tele, but these aren't garden variety "pretty" clean tones, as they have a preponderance of snarly midrange. By backing off my attack, however, I was able to elicit breathier, less intense textures that shined with a lovely top-end detail. Switching over to the Drive channel, the Budda reaches levels of sonic nirvana by offering up enough gain to satisfy any player from a slow-burn blues dude, to a rocker-freak who can't get enough dirt. But here's the thing: Whether I dialed in my grind with the preamp via the Drive control, or simply cranked the Master to work the amp's power tubes, the tones were always immediate, super-sensitive to the touch, and simply swimming in corpulent upper-midrange that sounded great with the Tele and simply went to another level with humbucker-equipped guitars. The term "modern vintage" comes to mind as the tones fell somewhere between Bluesbreakers-era Clapton, and more aggressive, early EVH tones. I don't think I need to tell you how badass that is.

Chicago Blues Box Kingston 30

Cosmetically speaking, the Kingston 30 is a straight looker inside and out. The purple Tolex is, well, it's purple Tolex! Does it get any cooler than that? Methinks not. Especially when it's draped over a pine cabinet sporting finger-jointed corners. Inside the stainless-steel chassis you'll find a dense, yet neat, point-to-point-wired circuit and a checklist of boutique accoutrements including silver-plated Teflon-coated wire, ceramic tube sockets, and custom made one-watt resistors throughout. And although the Kingston 30 ships with TAD short bottle 6L6s, the amp will also accommodate 6V6, 5881, or EL34 output tubes. The Kingston's control panel, which dazzles with jewel-encrusted knobs that would make Liberace wet his knickers, offers Volume, Treble, Bass, and Reverb controls, as well as High and Low inputs, a Bright Switch, and a Harmonic Boost function that adds +4dB of gain when engaged. However, I thought one of the Kingston's neatest features was the way the Extension speaker and Slave jacks are located on opposite ends at the bottom of the cabinet's rear panel. Pretty stealthy.

Sweet Home Chicago

Tonally, the Kingston 30 manages to give off all of the bark, thump, and sing of a low-wattage vintage Marshall, as tactile, blossoming lead lines spew forth with brilliant clarity and a rich, pugnacious midrange. This little dude packs a hell of a wallop, as its tones are much larger than its diminutive stature would indicate. That said, the Kingston also exuded a sweet, almost airy top-end, much like a vintage Fender, when I simply backed off my Tele's volume knob and lighthead up my picking attack. But I had the most fun with a PRS McCarty plugged in and the amp's Volume control turned up halfway. In this scenario, each note had a weight behind it that actually made me play less—and that's because every note sounded so good, I had to savor each one. Even with the tastefully voiced Bright switch on and high settings of the Treble control, the Kingston never gave way to harshness or garbled notes. Most impressive, however, was the way the Kingston just kept howling when cranked all the way up, all the while maintaining a taut, firm low-end that allowed me to riff on power chords and have every one sound distinct.

Courtesy of a full-size Accutronics tank, the reverb adds just the right amount of dimension and space to the Kingston's tones. It's warm and rich sounding with a lovely drip, but even when maxed it doesn't go into the surf zone. Not a bummer, however, as this reverb perfectly complements the amplifier's burnished sounds. Bottom line: If you're jonesing for a hand-made amp that delivers an astounding hybrid of high-caloric British and American tones, the Kingston 30 is the sonic equivalent of a cheese-drippin' deep-dish pizza.

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