



ZT LUNCHBOX ACOUSTIC AMP

This tiny amp doesn't look big enough for a picnic for two, but packs 200 watts in alongside the sandwiches. Sam Wise finds out how.

ZT amps have been making a noise on the electric guitar scene for some time, making tiny amplifiers that outperform anyone's expectations, but this is the first time they've turned their attention to the acoustic music scene. ZT are the brainchild of Ken Kantor, an audio designer of some repute with a reputation for making things smaller without sacrificing performance. Having worked for many years both inside audio firms and from the outside as a consultant, Kantor decided in 2000 to start a business building his own miniature guitar amps, and ZT were born. The Lunchbox Acoustic competes in size with 10-watt practice amps but claims that on power and quality it's up there with the big boys. With its two channels and phantom-powered

XLR input, it's clearly designed as a mini sound system for guitar and vocals, which is ambitious indeed in such a small unit.

Build and Features

The Lunchbox Acoustic is simply the smallest serious amplifier I've ever seen. It's dwarfed by the shoebox that holds my mixing desk power supply, and it really will fit in a bicycle basket; I checked. With its white woodgrain finish and cloth speaker cover, the Lunchbox looks more like a speaker from a mini hi-fi than a typical amp, and the appearance really sets it apart. This would look as much at home in a chic apartment as a studio, and will certainly stand out in a music shop. It feels pretty robust, however: the cabinet appears to

The back panel features both XLR and jack inputs for mics, and a phantom power switch, so you could potentially plug in a condenser mic for guitars with no pickup.

be made from formica and should be as tough as your kitchen worktop. The top panel holds the controls for both channels: a simple arrangement of gain, bass, treble and reverb for each, a master volume, and a notch filter for eliminating feedback. There's also a jack input for guitar on top, but the mic connection is on the back, presumably because while you might want to change guitars around during a performance, you'd be unlikely to change mics!

The back panel features both

XLR and jack inputs for mics, and a phantom power switch, so you could potentially plug in a condenser mic for guitars with no pickup. There's also an effects loop, a headphone/line-out, and an external speaker connection which can only be used if you switch off the internal speaker, and of course, an input for your iPod or CD player. This is not an unusually large selection of features, but on the tiny back panel it looks very rich indeed. The Lunchbox looks great and should be very



rugged. I have only two concerns: the first is that after six months kicking around the back of your car, the lovely white formica will be showing the dirt rather more than your average black vinyl. The only other is the miniature toggle switch to select internal or external speaker, which looks as though it could be vulnerable in the hurly-burly of life in the back of a van (or Smart car, in this case).

Sounds and Usability

Practicality is definitely a strong point of the Lunchbox; let's face it, it would almost fit in the front pocket of your gig bag. It's easy to carry, easy to find space for, and about the right height to rest your foot on, if you are so inclined. The control layout of the top panel is extremely easy to understand, and the black-on-silver print should be easy to see even on a dark stage. The big question in most people's minds will be whether such a small amp can really produce the goods sonically, however. History has taught musicians that larger is better, sound quality-wise, and the ZT challenges that perception head-on. Plugging in, I was pleased to discover a very nice, transparent tone; it simply sounded like my guitar, but louder. I always miss a mid control in an EQ, and this was no exception, but the core tone was so good that it wasn't an issue. If your guitar has a pickup which requires extreme EQ to sound good, the lack of an ability to boost or cut the mid could hurt, but if your pickup system is good to start with, you'll have no problem with the Lunchbox.

Certainly, the EQ and volume



section is very intuitive and easy to use, and it was hard to go far wrong. The notch filter, designed to cut the frequencies that generate feedback, is unusual in that it has three positions. Most notch filters allow you to sweep around the frequency range till you find the troublesome spot, so how good an effect you can really get from three fixed positions is tricky to judge. The reverb is really the only effect you need on an acoustic amp; most of us use nothing else, and if you are one of those who prefer effects, the chances are you use an outboard device anyway. The reverb works well, and for all that it's limited to a single sound, the payback is in the simplicity. It's impressive, too, just how the sound holds up as you crank up the volume: whether it's vocals or guitar, it doesn't sound boxy and it doesn't distort. Where I do have a beef, however, is with the claim of 200 watts. Now, I know that wattage doesn't translate directly to volume, but whereas my 200-watt bass amp will shake the walls without breaking a sweat, the

Lunchbox doesn't seem any louder than my existing 60-watt amp. I'll admit that I didn't get it up to 10, due to feedback issues, but there wasn't much further to go. This is not necessarily a problem: the Lunchbox is amply loud for small club gigs, but the 200 watts is misleading.

Conclusion

Put simply, there is no more portable solution for a singer/guitarist than this. With a shoulder bag you can walk to your gigs, or take the bus, or even cycle (some bands like the Ginger Ninjas are now touring by bicycle!). It'll also take up very little space if you live in a small flat, and just as importantly, it sounds great and is well built. It's cheaper than many nice 60-watt combos, and it looks like no other amp into the bargain. The only black mark is that it doesn't sound three times as loud as a 60-watter, but if you're looking for a small amp, you simply must try this out.

Sam Wise

ZT LUNCHBOX Acoustic Amp

www.acousticmagazine.com for reviews



Technical specification

Price: £389
Made In: USA
Power: 200-watt 2-channel amp
Speaker: 6.5" Speaker
Inputs: 1 XLR/Line level input, 1 x guitar input, Aux in (for CD/MP3)
Outputs: Two outputs
EQ: 2-band EQ
Effects: Digital reverb, effects loop

Contact details

Aria UK
Tel: 01483 238720
www.ariauk.com

What we think

Pros: Sounds good, looks good, well priced and tiny.
Cons: Not as loud as 200 watts would have you imagine, speaker switch could be vulnerable.
Overall: Knocks the competition for six. If you need a small amp, try one.

Our Ratings Explained

5 Stars: Superb, Almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, Hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.

Rating out of five

BUILD QUALITY
SOUND QUALITY
VALUE FOR MONEY

