



## Gear Review - The "Lunchbox" and the "Club" by ZT Amplifiers

Date 2010/7/29 8:00:00 | Topic: Amplifiers

When I first began playing guitar there was a trend toward large guitar amplifiers. It seemed that the bigger and louder the amplifier, the more "cool factor" the player had regardless of their talent level. In the club environment the drummer would fight for the space to set up his kit due to the fact the guitarist had taken up half of the meager stage with his mega-stack not to mention a rack or two of outboard effects gear.

Over the years I have seen a growing number of players become a little more realistic in the sizes of their amplifiers, as well as transition away from rack gear and toward individual effects pedals. Even so, many of the smaller combo amplifiers today are still quite bulky and heavy, and the smaller versions tend to be underpowered for the stage environment. Today we are going to look at a pertinent solution to problems that amplifiers have created for musicians around the world. The "Lunchbox" and the "Club" by ZT Amplifiers are extremely compact lightweight amplifiers that pack a punch like no other amplifier on the market in their size class.

### The "Lunchbox" by ZT Amplifiers



1



The “Lunchbox” is aptly named due to its size and shape which closely resembles a grade school lunchbox. It measures 7.7” x 9.8” x 4.4” and weighs in at just under ten pounds. The top mounted controls are simple yet functional and include “Ambience”, a single “Tone” control, “Volume”, and “Gain”. You will also find a standard ¼” input and a power indicator light. Over all this looks like a no frills amplifier with very little in the way of features, but a look at the back panel of the amplifier tells a completely different story. Here you will find some well thought out options, including some not available on other amplifiers on the market.



The first thing you will probably notice is the line-level ¼” headphone output with a dedicated volume control. Also included is a “Speaker Out” for connecting to an external speaker cabinet, an “Aux Input” for connecting an MP3 player or similar device, a mini-toggle “Speaker” switch to turn the internal speaker on or off, and a “Voltage” switch that allows the Lunchbox to operate at either

115V or 230V. Rounding it all out is the mini rocker switch for power.



Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this amplifier is the power rating of 200 Watts. ZT claims that this little amplifier can peak at 120 decibels at one meter. To put this in perspective, 120db is considered to be the threshold of pain and can be compared with a front row seat at a rock concert. To put it simply, you have more power at your fingertips driven through this amp than you would probably ever need in most cases.

### The “Club” by ZT Amplifiers



The goal of a compact lightweight stage worthy amplifier was studiously maintained in the design of the “Club” amplifier. This is a larger version of the Lunchbox with a footprint of 14”x15”x9.25” and weighing just 22 pounds. While the features of the Club closely resemble those on the Lunchbox, the larger chassis allowed ZT Amplifiers to add a few more features which they shoehorned around a 12” speaker. The new features include an “Effects Loop”, and a combination of “Bass” and “Treble” tone controls. The only other notable difference in design is that the “Ambience” control has been replaced with a plate style “Reverb”.



## Sound Tests

**The “Lunchbox”** - I decided to begin my testing with the “Lunchbox”. I selected my G&L S-500 and plugged in directly to the amplifier. I started with a lower volume level with very little gain and gradually turned it up. As it got increasingly louder, I was expecting the speaker to start crackling and rattling, but to my astonishment the small 6.5 inch speaker performed admirably to the highest earsplitting level. I did however find that I was getting quite a bit of hum from the amplifier as I increased the volume. To combat this I plugged the Lunchbox into a Furman power conditioner which cut the unwanted noise by about 75%. I then increased the gain to about 60% which knocked out almost the entire remaining hum. It is only fair to mention however that ZT does recommend turning the gain to 50% before adjusting the volume. This is largely due to the fact that the gain setting is designed as an input signal control rather than an overdrive or distortion control. Keeping it set at higher levels will keep the noise to a minimum.

The sound of the Lunchbox can best be described as “unique”. It is very apparent that the designers at ZT Amplifiers were not trying to emulate or model other products that are already available on the market, but rather trying to bring a new option to the tone conscious guitar player. Plugging in a guitar by itself yields a clean, dry sound that can readily be tailored to your specific needs using the tone controls or outboard effects. Using the ambience, tone, and gain controls gives you a great foundation to build styles ranging from chicken picking twang, to smooth jazzy riffs, all the way up

to some great rock rhythm and lead tones. These sounds can be further enhanced with the use of your favorite effects pedals.



**Gear Guy Tip:** *The ambience control is not a reverb as some may expect. Turning this knob gives a very subdued effect that is reminiscent of the difference between an “open back” or “closed back” speaker cabinet design. It was designed for this purpose and it does exactly what the engineers at ZT Amplifiers intended. If you are looking for reverb, you will need to use a good effects pedal.*

With this in mind I plugged in a few effects pedals including a T-Rex “Room-Mate” tube reverb, a DigiTech CM-2 Hardwire Overdrive, as well as my ever present BBE “Sonic Stomp” for added clarity and detail. The Lunchbox handled the effects commendably. I found the reverb added that extra sparkle that I desire as well as some tube-like qualities. The overdrive yielded some great rock rhythm and lead sounds with which I was more than satisfied. One of the most astounding attributes is that the volume level achieved with the Lunchbox which compares favorably with amplifiers ten times it’s the physical size.

Turning off the internal speaker and using the Lunchbox as just a head through a 4x12 guitar speaker cab further opened up the sound. I do not want to take anything away from the internal speaker because what it can do on its own is incredible for a speaker its size, but the larger cabinet does sound perceptibly fuller for the primary reason that larger speakers just push more air. It is amazing that an amplifier this size can drive a large cabinet to such high volume levels with remarkable results.

I personally find the dedicated volume control for the headphones output to be a desirable feature. This allows you to monitor the amplifier at a safe listening level. This is particularly useful in a situation where the positioning of the amplifier is hard for you to hear, but the amp's volume is too loud for the headphones. This line level output can also be used as a Direct Out to run to a mixing board or to a recording device which also gives added function to the dedicated volume knob.

**The “Club”** - Moving on to the “Club”, I found its dry signal to be a little more detailed and full which seems to be the result of a the wider frequency response of the larger speaker. The difference of having two tone controls also helps to open up the tonal opportunities, yet remains simple enough for an inexperienced player to operate.

The sound of this amplifier seems to have a natural compression aspect that is very musical. The lows are exceptionally tight and focused while the highs maintain clarity and detail. Overall it responds quickly to your playing. My only area of concern is with the reverb which I would personally rate as average based on others I've tried. I am sure that this is because guitar players are more used to spring reverb on amplifiers, and plate reverbs tend to be a little more subdued in comparison. Even so, I rarely use much of the built in reverb on amplifies, and tend to prefer a pedal effect for this function anyway.

Like the Lunchbox, the Club handles pedals brilliantly; however the effects loop gave me a completely different option. It allowed me to plug in my DigiTech RP-1000 to see how the Club would hold up to modeled amplifiers. By using the effects loop I could bypass the internal preamplifier of the Club and just use the power stage. This is important because the preamp will color the sound of the modeled amp if plugged directly through the guitar input.

I first selected my favorite Twin Reverb® model for this test. The Club offered an excellent transparent power stage giving me that wonderful Twin Reverb® sound that I enjoy so much for clean guitar tones. Moving into higher gain amplifier models the Club’s 200 Watts of power resulted in an unbelievable hard rock sound. It is actually somewhat mind boggling to hear a small amplifier putting forth a wall of sound reminiscent of a huge high wattage head.

### Closing Thoughts

After having a chance to experience the incredible power of these two small yet efficient workhorses, I have to admit that I am quite impressed. Either of these amplifiers will hold their own in a gigging environment, even when competing with that loud drummer who suddenly finds himself with a lot more elbow room. In fact, you may even be able to talk the drummer into helping you pack up your gear which is something that rarely happens with a full size amp.

For the causal player, or the person who travels frequently, the Lunchbox would make a great addition. It is small enough to carry in a backpack, but also loud enough to handle just about any situation that may arise. I would personally prefer the Club for larger venues since the larger speaker does give better frequency response without needing to plug it into an external cab. You may want to try them both out yourself since I feel compelled to point out that Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top has been known to use the Lunchbox on stage as have other well known players such as Nels Cline (Wilco) and John Platania (Van Morrison's long-time lead guitarist).

I award both the “Lunchbox” and the “Club” by ZT Amplifiers the “Rig Ready Award” for 2010. These are wonderful options that work well for both a gigging rig and a practice amplifier. Make sure to try one out yourself when you are in the market for a new amplifier. I think you will be as surprised as I was.



By: Gary Allen

**Copyright © 2010 Allen & Halberg, Inc.**

**All Rights Reserved**

**GuitarGearHeads.com® is a Registered Trademark of Allen & Halberg, Inc.**

This article comes from GuitarGearHeads - Gear Up Your Sound

<http://www.guitargearheads.com><sup>2</sup>

The URL for this story is:

<http://www.guitargearheads.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1375><sup>3</sup>

## Links

1. <http://www.ztamplifiers.com/>
2. <http://www.guitargearheads.com/>
3. <http://www.guitargearheads.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1375>