

Amplifier Reviews

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Review of the ZT Lunchbox LBG2 Ultra-Compact Guitar Amplifier

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"The word "awesome" is much overused. But, believe me, this guitar combo is truly awesome..."



Features of the ZT Lunchbox Guitar Amp

The first thing you'll notice about the lunchbox is its diminutive size. It's 10 inches long (!), 7 inches tall and 5 inches deep. The second thing you'll notice is the weight, the Lunchbox weighs in at an impressive 5kg. At first I thought this was because the case was metal, but it's actually mdf with metallic silver finish. The weight must come from the components used in the power stage of the amplifier. So, immediately, the Lunchbox challenges the way you perceive small amplifiers.

Through the wide metal grille on the front you can clearly see the 6.5 inch (16 cm) integral loudspeaker. On the top of the cabinet is a sturdy solid plastic carrying handle and behind this sits the recessed control panel. From left to right on the control panel we find a red led which indicates power is on. Next to that are four rotary controls for Ambience, Tone, Volume and Gain. The panel is completed by a single jack input.

On the back panel there's an AC inlet and an operating voltage switch for 230 or 115 volt operation. Next to that is the on/off rocker switch and a two-way microswitch that mutes the speaker. Muting the speaker before turning the amp on and off will stop any clicks or bangs from adversely affecting the speaker. Elsewhere on the back panel is a standard jack output for external speakers together with a line level output also on a standard jack. The line level can be used for DI out to a PA amp or recording console but also serves to power headphones with the speaker switch set to mute. In either case it has a dedicated rotary level control to adjust the output independently of the main volume and gain controls. The last thing on the back is a mini-jack input for an MP3 player. The input here actually bypasses the gain circuit so the reproduction of MP3s is always clean.

Normally at this point I'd start to tell you what this little amp sounds like, but the ZT Lunchbox is so special that I need to tell you some background stuff first.

The audio scientists at ZT tore up the rulebook and started the design of the Lunchbox with what they call "clean slate thinking" and set their target to "optimise the electrical, acoustic and mechanical systems" that make up an amplifier combo. Perhaps the cleverest piece of the new thinking is the combined use analog and digital.

The input signal goes through a preamp to the analog gain pot and a diode overdrive system. This allows you to use the Gain control to dictate the input sensitivity. At this point the signal is converted to 24 bit digital. The Lunchbox automatically adds its own special dynamics and eq in the digital domain and the tone and ambience control also acts on this digital signal before it's converted back to analog and sent to the power amplification stage.

The power amplification stage contains two Class A/B amplifiers. Simply put, a Class A/B amp combines the reliability of Class A amps with the better power efficiency of Class B amps. The two amps are bridged. In simple terms this allows the amps to work together producing twice the voltage increase for the same power consumption.

Sound of the ZT Lunchbox Guitar Amp

The first thing to get across to you is how loud this little amplifier can go. It really is astonishingly loud. It's rated at 200 watts peak with around 180 watts of "sustained average music power". Probably more revealing is the fact it delivers more than 120 decibels when measured at 1 metre from the amp.

The second thing to get across is the sheer quality of that sound. I hooked up to try out the amp and carried on playing for several hours. And later I went back to play some more. The basic tone of the amp is rich and warm, so much so that I was convinced there were some valves in there somewhere! The overdrive is smooth, progressive, rich in dynamics and never harsh. Set the gain to get your preferred sound and then adjust the volume to suit.

The tone control is programmed to have the characteristics of a "vintage stack". I'm not quite sure what relevance this has, but I found that leaving it at 12 o'clock created the tones I like best. Advancing the tone knob beyond this tended to increase the residual noise produced by the amplifier. ZT themselves admit in the manual that there is residual noise present, but they correctly state that it's simply a consequence of how loud this amp can be. They say they could've added a noise gate but were reluctant to allow such a thing to interfere with the "tone, touch and sustain" of their amplifier.

The ambience control gives you the opportunity to create the effect on your sound of a closed-back or open-backed cabinet. Turned fully counter-clockwise it gives a closed-back sound. I'm assuming this equates with the ambience being off, as the Lunchbox is itself a closed-back cab. Turning it progressively clockwise applies a very subtle reverberation that adds "space" to the sound.

When an amplifier uses a loudspeaker smaller than 10 inches you can normally expect the ability of that loudspeaker to properly deliver the full sonic spectrum to be impaired. Somehow ZT have overcome this problem and the performance of their custom "Ultra-Power" loudspeaker. I was literally blown away.

Overall Impressions of the ZT Lunchbox Guitar Amp

The result of ZT's "clean slate thinking" is a genuinely amazing piece of kit. Because of their approach and their innovative use of technology the Lunchbox is like nothing you've ever used before. Imagine never having to lug your 2x12 combo to a gig again. If you play pub gigs and small venues the Lunchbox could completely take over from your current combo.

I'm not sending this back to imuso. It's mine. And I want the acoustic version too...