

# Letters from America

San Francisco amp builder Bruce Clement of BC Audio has a long-held love of octal preamp valves. **DAVE HUNTER** sizes up the JTX50



## DAVE HUNTER

Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of numerous books including *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*.

With the vast majority of amp manufacturers using the same nine-pin, small-bottle preamp tubes to populate their creations' front ends, I find anything that differs from the norm to be extremely enticing. BC Audio of San Francisco is all about differing from the norm; namely, Bruce Clement – he of the 'BC' initials – has long had a passion for larger eight-pin (aka 'octal') preamp tubes, and all of his amps are packed with the things.

If you haven't encountered them, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the octal 6SL7s that Clement uses in his designs were stubby 6V6s. Not so. These are dual-triodes that function much like the more common nine-pin ECC83/12AX7 varieties that, oh, some 95 per cent of amps employ, but they are generally known to contribute a slightly thicker, warmer, more full-bodied tone when used right. These are the characteristics that have hooked Clement on the things.

The 6SL7 has an amplification factor of 70, which, when compared to the familiar 12AX7's amplification factor of 100, tells us it's a little cooler. It still has plenty of gusto, though – around the same as a nine-pin 5751, and somewhat more than the 12AY7 used in many Fender tweed amps – and its marginally tamer gain helps

it avoid the fizziness that many traditional preamp stages induce when wound up high. Clement further relates that when this octal preamp tube distorts, it does so in a manner more akin to the way an output tube clips, contributing a thicker breed of crunch to the amp's overall distortion. The 6SL7 leant its warm, smooth character to many vintage amps made by Valco, certain eras of the Ampeg Jet and Reverberocket, and others, but it has been a minority component for most contemporary makers. For Clement and his BC Audio designs, however, it's a sort of *raison d'être*.

Clement originally made a name for himself building his Number series amps, with escalating feature sets. Amplifier No. 7, for example, is a simple 15- or 25-watter with two blendable volume controls and a presence control feeding a cathode-biased output stage. Amplifier No. 8 adds a master volume and a drive control for a more lead-intended tone. Amplifier No. 9 ups it to 45 watts and adds a few more control functions, while No. 10 is BC Audio's fully-featured amp, with nine knobs across the front panel. All are entirely original designs that clone or

copy nothing, while producing archetypal and familiar guitar tones that might be labelled 'classic' within the rock spectrum – familiar, therefore, yet something rather new and different, too.

The Octal-Plex series, however, of which this JTX50 is one, seeks to do something else. It is, admittedly, inspired by a legendary transition-era Marshall of the 1960s – to wit, the 'flag logo' JTM50 of around early 1967 which had adopted EL34s but not yet dropped its tube rectifier – but pays homage to that collectible classic by rendering its spirit with Clement's beloved 6SL7 front end, and adding a few nifty mods to enhance performance and usability. The Octal-Plex series also includes the JTX45, which springs from the JTM45 platform with KT66 output tubes, and the JMX50, which does the fully-formed Plexi thing with EL34s and solid-state rectification.

## Different class

The JTX50 deviates from the available dead-spec clones out there in many ways other than its octal preamp tubes, though. The single input feeds dual Plexi-era normal and bright channels simultaneously, which can then be blended to taste

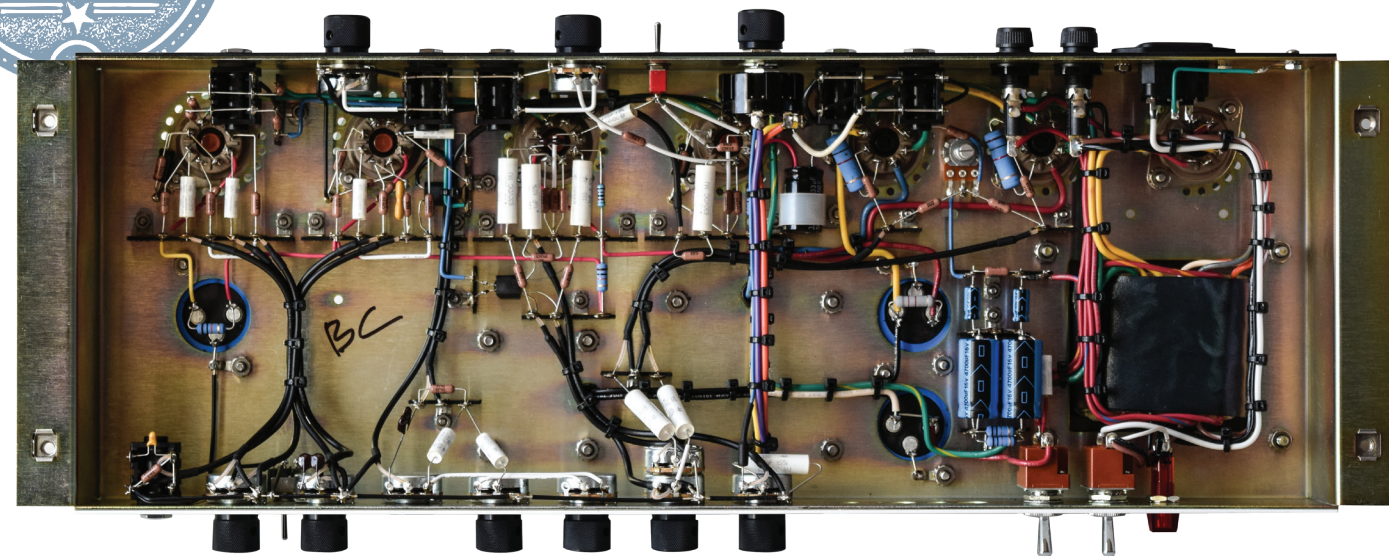
using independent volume controls. In addition to the rest of the traditional EQ knobs, a post-phase-inverter

*Clement has long had a passion for eight-pin preamp tubes, and his amps are packed with them*

## KEY FEATURES

### BC Audio JTX50

- **PRICE** £1,931 direct, at the current Brexit-inflected exchange rate (including upgrades for Gain Boost, Volume Boost, and FX Loop; excluding shipping and duties)
- **CONTROLS** Normal Volume, Bright Volume, Bass, Middle, Treble, Master Volume, Presence
- **OUTPUT** 50 watts
- **TUBES** Four 6SL7 preamp tubes, two EL34 output tubes; GZ34 rectifier
- **FEATURES** Gain Boost and Volume Boost (both footswitchable), series effects loop with Send and Return level controls; dual speaker outputs with switch for 4, 8 and 16-ohms
- **WEIGHT** 36lbs/16.3kg
- **CONTACT** bcaudio.com



The JTX50 packs four 6SL7 preamp tubes, two EL34 output tubes and a GZ34 rectifier



master volume enables heavy grind at lower output levels, and round back a tube-buffered effects loop with both send and return level controls (a \$150 upcharge from the base model) accepts a wide range of delay and modulation effects. In addition, this example includes Clement's upgrades for preset gain boost and volume boost (\$75 and \$100 respectively), which are both footswitch selectable, with a dual-button footswitch included.

Having dutifully named the functions, it's worth diving inside this JTX50 for a look at the impressive work that has gone into it. Clement assembles all of his amps using hand-wired, point-to-point construction bolstered by terminal strips where necessary, with no circuit board, and the result is a very different Plexi gut shot than we're generally used to seeing.

Clement's thinking, like many makers who use such build techniques, is that the shorter wire runs enable greater clarity and less noise. It sure makes for a tidy-looking chassis – itself a custom-made 16-gauge steel affair with heat dispersion holes around all tube sockets to help keep things cool. The transformers are all American-made paper bobbin/paper layer-wound designs by Classic Tone, and other internal components include Mallory signal capacitors and high-quality filter caps.

Tested through a TopHat 2x12 cab with early-80s Celestion G12-65s and a StoneAge 1x12 with EVM 12L Classic, using a Gibson 1959 Les Paul Reissue and a 1957 Telecaster, the JTX50 revealed no major surprises, given the

general ballpark of its inspiration, yet it presented a bountiful package of extremely playable and enjoyable textures. Framed in general terms, this amp issues big, fat, juicy guitar tones with, yes, a predisposition towards classic-rock and blues, but more versatility than you might expect.

It has the soft, round low end of tube-rectified Marshalls, which brings with it a chewy, compliant texture that makes the thing so much fun to play. That being said, being a loud 50-watter, there's plenty of clean headroom at lower volume settings (it remains crystalline up to around 10.30 or 11 o'clock on the dual volume controls with my Les Paul and the amp's master on full, which generates enough volume for almost any 'clean' gig), and it all stays pretty tight at these levels, too. The fun really begins,



though, when you advance the volume controls to induce a huge, pillowy crunch that is consistently thick, yet impressively clear, and also delightfully easy to voice thanks to the internal paralleling of the two channels.

## Master blaster

The master volume works well, but the amp sounds best with that knob up full (and a Fryette Power Station or a good attenuator in line between amp and speaker cab to reduce the

output level when necessary). It's often thus with vintage-leaning preamp stages, though, and in this case the JTX50 seems to reveal its true self – massive body, aggressive midrange thump, appealingly musical harmonic depths – when the master is effectively taken out of the equation. It's an enjoyable, musical and infectious sound generator, and a great alternative in the crowded field of Plexi-alikes.