



# BC Audio

## BEL AIR 40

TESTED BY MATT BLACKETT

**BC AUDIO HAS** been turning heads for years with super-cool racing-stripe optics, meticulous point-to-point wiring, octal preamp tubes, and bold, original designs that might be inspired by vintage ideas but clearly have their own thing going on sonically and structurally. This Bel Air 40 fits right in with that ethos for a unique take on tube-amp construction. I tested it with a Fender Stratocaster, a Music Man Majesty 6 Tiger Eye and a PRS McCarty Soapbar into a Greenback-loaded Buzz Feiten 2x12 cab.

One thing that sets the Bel Air apart is its trio of Power Tube Configuration switches, which, BC Audio says, allow you to “re-wire the power section in multiple ways,” on the fly, to affect wattage, feel and tonal response. It’s a fascinating approach, and one that can teach you plenty about how tube amps operate. These switches let you choose between Quad and Pair (four 6V6s or two), Pentode and Triode (determines how the power tubes operate), and Fixed Bias and Cathode Bias (selects how the tubes are biased). Depending on how you set them, the Bel Air’s power can go from 40 watts all the way down to fewer than five watts. This is handy, because there is no master volume on

the Bel Air. But viewing this Power Tube Configuration (PTC) merely as volume reduction is selling it short, because each of these controls affects much more than just output.

To get started, I plugged my trusty Strat in with every knob on the Bel Air 40 set at noon and the PTC set for Quad, Pentode and Fixed Bias. This produced a beautiful, dimensional, immediate sound that was loud and perfect for “Wind Cries Mary” cleans that could snarl a little if I really bashed them. Switching to the humbucker-equipped Music Man brought out more grit and volume, proving the input section to be über-responsive.

Before messing with the power-section switches, I explored some of the other front-panel controls. The three-band EQ is musically voiced and intuitive, and there’s a switch to take it out of the circuit. It was easy to bring out the best in both of those guitars — beefing up the Strat or subtracting some mids from the Majesty — but they both sounded great when I disengaged the EQ, and I had no problem working in the McCarty on any of the settings. There are also cut and presence controls to alter the top-end response, accompanied by a three-position

negative feedback toggle. They are similarly easy to dial in and play together nicely.

Everything made more sense to me when the amp was up loud. I cranked the volume and started playing with the power-stage switches. Quad/Pentode/Fixed is the loudest and most aggressive — think wide-open Malcolm Young stuff. Pair/Pentode/Fixed

### SPECIFICATIONS

#### Bel Air 40

**CONTACT** [bcaudio.com](http://bcaudio.com)

**PRICE** \$2,900 street

#### CHANNELS 1

**CONTROLS** Cut, presence, bass, mid, treble, body, volume

**SWITCHES** Quad/Pair, Pentode/Triode, Fixed Bias/Cathode Bias, three-position negative feedback, EQ in/out, three-position bright

**TUBES** Two 6SL7GT, four 6V6GT, GZ34 rectifier

**POWER** 40 watts

**WEIGHT** 34 lbs

**BUILT** USA

**KUDOS** Fascinating way to hear how power sections work. Meticulous construction. Slick cosmetics

**CONCERNS** Might seem pricey or limited to some

made it easier to get a smoother distortion. Quad/Triode/Fixed was a little mellower, and Pair/Triode/Fixed was a little softer and spongier still.

Interestingly, switching between Fixed Bias and Cathode Bias didn't do that much in Quad mode, but it made a big difference in Pair mode. All sounds are usable — it just depends on what you want to hear, what you want to feel and what guitar you're using. Having said that, there's not a huge difference between any of them, but the more you listen, the more you hear. And when you think about how they're being created — by mechanically tweaking the power section in real time — it's an intriguing and educational process.

The front end of the Bel Air seems to love stompboxes, especially the overdrive/boost variety. I plugged in a Seymour Duncan Power Grid distortion and could get nearly every note on the neck to feed back in a musical way. My Xotic EP Booster sounded great and

could almost function like a second channel. I hit the onboard boost on the Music Man Majesty on a relatively clean sound and took the Bel Air into singing sustain land.

As mentioned, you can defeat the EQ for a whole new sound. It doesn't function as a boost, like on other amps with this feature, but delivers a cool tonal shift. The three-way bright switch is subtle but effective, and the negative feedback switch does something I

can hear but struggle to put into words. Play this amp and you'll see what I mean.

It would be easy to look at the Bel Air 40 and see a one-channel amp with no effects loop and no master volume that costs nearly three Large. But this is an amp that has its own personality, and when you take a minute to get to know it, you find that it's actually like 10 takes on a fundamentally musical, honest and happening tone. ■

