

FIRST PLAY



**BLACKSTAR
HT CLUB 40 MK III**
£899

WHAT IS IT? Smallest combo in the new Mk III HT Venue range, which adds new features and improvements to the popular core valve-amp series

One More Time...

Blackstar's third iteration of the HT Venue range features updated styling and powerful modern features, such as CabRig speaker emulation and a brand-new digital reverb

Words Nick Guppy Photography Phil Barker

Introduced back in 2010 at that year's winter NAMM Show, Blackstar's HT Venue series of mid-priced combos and heads quickly established the company as the go-to brand for working players at all levels. Seven years later in 2017, we were among the first to glimpse the updated HT Venue Mk II. And today, almost another seven years on again, we're looking at the upgrade to the upgrade, in the shape of the new HT Venue Mk III. Has Blackstar's unceasing R&D program produced another winner? Let's take a look at possibly the most popular combo in the range, the 1x12 Club 40.

Like its predecessors, the new Mk III Club 40 is a good-looking amp, with pleasing proportions enhanced by Blackstar's elegant revised styling. A smart new metal badge sits atop a black and silver sparkle grille cloth, which conceals a single 12-inch Celestion Seventy 80 loudspeaker. Inside the chassis, most of the electronics sit on one large high-quality printed circuit board, with the familiar clean layout and minimal wiring we've come to expect on Blackstar products.

The Club 40 is a footswitchable two-channel design with a choice of two very different voices on both channels. The straightforward controls will be familiar to Blackstar users and newbies alike: the Clean channel has knobs for Volume, Treble and Bass, with a Voice select switch that toggles between American and British influences; while the Overdrive channel offers Gain, Volume, Bass, Middle, Treble and Blackstar's patented ISF (Infinite Shape Feature), which progressively changes the tone network from British to American configuration, adding great tonal flexibility. Another toggle switch changes the Overdrive channel between classic and modern voices.

As with the Clean channel, many circuit changes take place when these toggle switches are flipped, including EQ, gain, output stage negative feedback and speaker damping. Towards the far right of the front panel, there's a Master Volume and Reverb Level knob, together with another small toggle switch that drops the Club 40's output down to around four watts for home practice and recording.



1. The all-new Mk III HT Venue amps have a brand-new badge that underlines the classy styling, as well as hinting at the significant design upgrades inside the chassis



2. Big news for the Mk III amps is the addition of CabRig, Blackstar's in-house dynamic microphone, speaker cabinet and room simulation, which sidesteps the latency and phase issues often experienced with multiple IRs

3. A two-button footswitch comes supplied as standard, or you can upgrade to the optional five-button FS-14, which accesses all the channels and voices as well as reverb and a boost. You can use both footswitches together for even more flexibility



4. Sitting on the front panel next to the master volume, this useful Power toggle switch drops the Club 40's output down to a home-friendly four watts. You can also use the rear-panel headphones/CabRig outputs for silent practice and recording as they stay active in standby mode



One of the most important additions to the new Mk III amps is the addition of CabRig, Blackstar's own dynamic microphone, cabinet and environment simulation, accessed via USB using the Architect desktop app. On the rear panel, there's a mono XLR and stereo headphones/line out for feeding the CabRig signal into a console, while the USB socket allows four-channel recording direct to your DAW, as well as loading up to three onboard CabRig presets.

Other rear-panel features include a series effects loop with Level control, a choice of Dark or Light voices for the HT's digital reverb, and a pair of jack sockets for the supplied two-way unit and/or the optional FS-14 five-button controller, which access all channels and voices, together with a global boost option. There's even a Kensington lock slot, making this combo ideal for semi-permanent backline installations in places such as rehearsal studios, schools and churches. Together with the new tweaked cosmetics, the HT Venue Mk III version of the Club 40 looks slick and ready to rock, with all the features you'd expect on a modern valve amp.

Feel & Sounds

We checked out the Club 40 with our regular Strat and Les Paul guitars, using a small pedalboard and a PC connection to check out the CabRig sounds. The Clean channel's two voices will be familiar to most ears, with a tight bass, slightly scooped midrange and sweet treble in the USA setting compared with a warmer and more dynamic British tone that chimes at medium level settings and can be pushed hard into a mild overdrive if needed.

Likewise, the Overdrive channel swaps between a classic 'hot-rod' overdrive with medium speaker damping and a looser, more aggressive modern voice that benefits from a powerful pre-gain mid boost. This sounds great with single coils – but it's magical with a good PAF-style humbucker. The EQs operate smoothly and using the overdrive channel's ISF, dialling in any guitar for USA or UK tones (and any point in between), is an intuitive operation that takes just a few seconds.

The CabRig outputs lift the new Mk III into a different league, with the ability to send mono or stereo feeds to a console with the speaker switched on or off, making the Club 40 ideal for quiet stages

WARNING!: DO NOT OBSTRUCT VENTILATION GRILLES
ATTENTION!: NE PAS OBSTRUER LES GRILLES DE VENTIL



The Reverb Voice switch offers a choice of bright, slightly crashy vintage plate reverb or a warmer more 'boutique' room model. Both reverbs are very high quality and easily replace outboards or plug-ins

in venues like theatres or churches. CabRig settings are accessed using the Club 40's rear-panel USB socket and Blackstar's Architect desktop app, which lets you edit, store and load virtual microphones, cabinets and environments, as well as edit the Club 40's digital reverb to taste. As you might expect, the software is easy to use with clean no-frills rendering, while the simulations are eerily authentic, with no latency or phase issues.

When you want to rock, though, there's plenty of level from the Celestion Seventy 80 loudspeaker, which is one of our favourite combo drivers, enhanced with a smooth bass response from the slightly oversized cabinet.

Verdict

While valve technology remains frozen in time, digital advances continue to affect every area of music making. And there's been a definite trend in the last couple of years toward integrating both approaches, with studio-quality digital reverbs increasingly replacing the venerable spring tank, and integrated digital cabinet simulations like CabRig with outputs for live and studio use.

The CabRig outputs lift the Club 40 into a different league, making it ideal for quiet stages

It's hard to level criticism when every aspect of the Mk III has been evaluated and polished by Blackstar's R&D team. The only thing that some players may find difficulty with is the Club 40's size and weight: as 1x12 40-watters go, it's on the heavy side. There are no smaller alternatives in the new range as yet, although, of course, if you need compact and portable, Blackstar already has several tempting options to look at.

Aimed at serious amateurs and working pro players, Blackstar's new improved HT Venue Mk III range continues to provide all you could want from a modern guitar amplifier, with affordable pricing that stands up well compared to the competition. If you want to combine authentic valve tone with digital pizzazz, it's a great choice. **G**



BLACKSTAR HT CLUB 40 MK III 1X12 COMBO

PRICE: £899

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Valve/solid-state preamp, valve power amp

VALVES: 2x 12AX7 preamp, 2x EL34 power amp (can be rebiased for 6L6)

OUTPUT: 40W RMS, switchable to 4W

DIMENSIONS: 588 (w) x 260 (d) x 480mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 24/53

CABINET: Plywood

LOUDSPEAKER: 1x 12" Celestion Seventy 80

CHANNELS: 2, both with dual-voice switching

CONTROLS: Clean channel volume, bass, treble, voice select. Overdrive channel gain, voice select, volume, bass, middle, treble, ISF (Infinite Shape Feature), reverb level, hi/low power switch, master volume. CabRig sim select, loop level, reverb dark/light switches (on rear panel)

FOOTSWITCH: 2-button footswitch (supplied) toggles channels and voice type

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Digital reverb, CabRig speaker-emulated DI/headphones out, series effects loop, USB recording and connection to Blackstar's Architect app

OPTIONS: 5-button FS-14 footswitch sells for £95; allows selection of all channels and voices, plus a boost on all channels and reverb on/off

RANGE OPTIONS: Mk III HT Venue range also includes: Stage 60 1x12 combo (£999), Stage 60 2x12 combo (£1,490), Club 50H head (£899) and Stage 100H head (£999). Matching 1x12, 2x12 and 4x12 cabs cost £269, £379 and £569 respectively

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9/10

PROS Subtle visual tweaks give a serious professional vibe; onboard CabRig speaker emulation; excellent all-new digital reverb; rebias potential to 6L6 valves

CONS It's a hefty box to lift and carry; a simple aux in would have been a useful addition (though you can stream audio in via USB)