

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
**Guitarist**

# Blackstar<sup>®</sup>

## AMPLIFICATION

» CELEBRATING A DECADE OF PIONEERING TONE

Blackstar<sup>®</sup>



FEATURING

» The Blackstar Story » Tech Insights » Inside The Amps  
» New Products » The Future Of Tone » Artist Features

# Celebrating 10 years of the sound in your head with...



**Gus G.**  
Firewind  
"Welcome to the church of distortion."  
(Series One Blackfire 200 user since 2010)



**Richie Sambora**  
"From studios to stadiums, these are the amps I use."  
(Artisan 100 & Series One 1046L6 user since 2013)



**Neal Schon**  
Journey  
"The Blackstar Series One 100 is one of the best sounding amps that I've played through. It produces a powerful punchy-smooth-warm and precise sound."  
(Series One 100 user since 2012)



**Joe Don Rooney**  
Rascal Flatts  
"Clarity can be a rarity when it comes to finding a great amp, but the first Blackstar I plugged into I heard clarity like no other."  
(Series One 200 user since 2013)



**Bob Mould**  
"I picked up my cable, plugged into the Artisan 100 and thought, this is the best amp I've ever played."  
(Artisan 100 user since 2012)



**Huey Morgan**  
Fun Lovin' Criminals  
"This is how I roll."  
(HT Stage 100 user since 2014)



**James Dean Bradfield**  
Manic Street Preachers  
"I love this amp!"  
(Artisan 30 user since 2009)



**Albert Hammond Jr.**  
The Strokes  
"The Blackstar Artist 30 gives me amazing tube tone and the sonic options I need."  
(Artist 30 user since 2015)



**Uli Jon Roth**  
Scorpions, Sky Avalon, Electric Sun  
"I love the Blackstar Artisan 100! It has a fantastic overall response, is extremely well built and totally reliable."  
(Artisan 100 & Series One 200 user since 2011)



**Sammy Hagar**  
Chickenfoot, Warburitas  
"The Blackstar sound is inspiring."  
(Series One 100 user since 2013)



**Steve Cradock**  
Paul Weller, Ocean Colour Scene  
"The Artisan 30 has great tone! I've got three of the little f\*\*\*ers in line!"  
(Artisan 30 user since 2007)



**Ihsahn**  
Emperor  
"All the clarity and punch I expect from a valve head. Blackstar's designers obviously have the modern guitar player in mind."  
(Series One 200 user since 2010)

...and all the other Blackstar players around the world.



# STAR QUALITIES

It's often said that the world of guitar is slow to embrace change. The 10 years of success and innovation that Blackstar has enjoyed, however, put the lie to that idea. I remember visiting Blackstar's factory a few years ago and being shown a prototype of an ID:Core amplifier and wondering how on earth they'd gotten such a huge, room-filling sound out of such a small box. When they then told me that the amp was going to sell for the price of an effects pedal, it gave me an acute attack of what I now recognise as the Blackstar 'Wow' effect. To put such bold, innovative tech into a package that even beginners could afford is so typical of the Blackstar way of doing things.

The company always seems to have a fresh perspective on design and yet, at the same time, such a strong feel for the classic tones that excite all guitarists. From hand-wired Artisan combos to the bleeding-edge ID:Core BEAM amps that form a music hub for your home, the one thing that always seems to come as standard in a Blackstar amp is great sound. That all this has grown from the hard work of a team of mates, all dedicated to a dream of doing things differently, is all the more impressive.

It's hard to strike out on your own: it takes guts and perseverance and talent to make it work. A decade on they're a true British success story and still as hungry as ever to explore the frontiers of sound. I'm sure you'll agree that's well worth celebrating.

**Jamie Dickson**  
Editor, *Guitarist* magazine



# RISING STAR

» In just 10 years, Blackstar has shot from shed-based newcomer to the most dynamic amp-builder on the scene. Here's how they shook things up

Blackstar's founding team of four has grown tenfold since its inception a decade ago. And yet through changing times and myriad product developments, Blackstar remains committed to fulfilling its company motto, 'The Sound In Your Head'

**L**ike all the best British ventures, it began in the pub. Around the table sat Bruce Keir, Ian Robinson, Paul Hayhoe and Richard Frost. It was 2004, and the four bandmates and amp specialists had all left senior positions at the auspicious Marshall brand, each man nagged by a belief that amplification could go further. "We had a choice," recalls Ian. "To stay together or go our separate ways. But we knew we could improve things. That was the driving force."

"We were sat in the pub one night," adds Paul, "and we asked ourselves what we wanted this new company to be. It had to be something different. Something that appealed around the world and gave people the tools they needed."

"We knew we were leaving a well-known brand," picks up Bruce. "But we were also somewhat limited: people expect Marshall to do Marshall things. We set out to make the most flexible amps we could design."

The four men had the vision and engineering chops – but precious little else. With the gleaming workshops of their former employer a fading memory, the nascent firm took its first steps in Ian's garden shed in Northampton: a grass-roots setup that proved a better ideas factory than any million-dollar facility. "We had no money or heating," smiles Ian. "But in that shed era, we designed 20 products. Our patented innovations like ISF and DPR came from that time. A lot of blue-sky thinking."

By 2007, they were ready to break cover. A name was chosen and a logo inked. "We spent a lot of late nights with a whiteboard," recalls Paul, "going through tanks, motorbikes, cars, meteorological phenomena, cool words, mashing them up. We wanted a logo that any band – from country to extreme metal – would feel comfortable with."

Then came the ultimate trial-by-fire. The Musikmesse: the Frankfurt trade show where fledgling brands either fly or die. "It was so last-minute," says Paul. "Richard and Ian were putting units

together on the patio. We met the printer in the South Mimms services to collect the catalogues, literally en route to the ferry. Then we drove over to Germany in a Transit van full of prototypes."

"We got a lot of interest," says Richard, "and it was clear straight away that what we were doing was hitting the spot."

From there, Blackstar kept rising. As the MI press rained accolades, A-listers ditched their existing rigs and public demand snowballed, it was obvious they were going to need a bigger shed. New offices were leased. Groundbreaking products were launched. Talented team members were recruited, including current head of marketing Joel Richardson and much-missed head of sales Keith Dudley. "We've become the number two amp brand in the USA, and really established in the UK," says Joel. "You can feel the growth."

Much has changed in a decade, but Blackstar has stayed true to that founding pub philosophy. "Our tagline is The Sound In Your Head," notes Joel. "That's what every guitarist wants."

The lightbulb moment might fire the starting pistol for a new product, but it's just the first phase of a long developmental journey. Blackstar's dedicated investment in forensic levels of R&D ensures that the technology in its amps continues to push forward in finding the right voice for you, the player



# THE IDEAS FACTORY

» **Blackstar's trailblazing amps are the result of bright ideas and hours of obsessive development, as the R&D team goes from brainwave to backline**

**T**ake a walk through the workshops at Blackstar and you can feel innovation in the air. In an industry that still subscribes to dusty rulebooks and received wisdom, this is one builder sworn to challenge tradition. "We've never stood still," says Ian Robinson. "Every time we design a new product, whether that's a £2,000 valve amp or a £59 practice amp, we're willing to do the research to take it to the next level. We're never comfortable with a 'me, too' product. To tell you the truth, it costs more, it takes longer, it's more of a pain sometimes. But that's just the way we do it."

At Blackstar, R&D isn't so much a department as a culture that pervades every aspect of the operation. As such, the next game-changing brainwave could come from anywhere, be that the four co-founders, head of R&D Laurent Veignal or trainee service engineer Tyler Silsby. "Innovation is our number-one criteria," says Laurent. "We have regular

innovation meetings, and it's not just people from R&D. We've got a talented young team and it's all about having as many ideas as you can. Because from those, sometimes a gem comes out."

"It's never someone saying, 'I'm the guru, you've got to suck it up,'" stresses Paul Hayhoe. "We're very inclusive, and there's no bad idea, whether it comes from the guys who joined us out of school or more mature guys like our mechanical draftsman Andy Poynter. We also speak to musicians, dealers and distributors around the world, and we're always asking them, 'Is there anything you'd like Blackstar to be doing?'"

"Our R&D process is very incremental," says Laurent. "The research stage makes sure we have all the technology. The second phase puts all that technology into a prototype, every aspect of which we make here in the UK: chassis, electronics, PCB, cabinet – everything. Then we engage with the manufacturer, take that research prototype and discuss everything from tests to choosing

components. Then we do a massive amount of testing."

When you casually plug into a Blackstar, you're hearing the result of countless obsessive hours of tweaking, fine-tuning and cross-referencing with the world's greatest historic amps. "I'm confident nobody goes into the detail we do, especially on the sonic side," says Ian. "The most important piece of kit we've got is the A/B box – we don't rely on 'sonic memory'. When we get new engineers, who've maybe been in the industry a long time, they're surprised, and I think they find it a challenge to work to a different standard."

It's an exhaustive – and at times exhausting – approach. But all that work is vindicated by a range of forward-thinking amps that let modern players find their voice. "If you go online," says Paul, "you get people saying, 'This is how amp-building has to be.' Well, I'm an old punk-rocker and, for me, it was all about breaking the rules, doing it yourself and being creative. The point of playing guitar is to express yourself."



All Blackstar amps and components must pass rigorous tests – including being put through the company's 'endurance room' – before they reach the final design stages and can then go into production ready to market

# HEAVY DUTY

» In a world of fragile boutique valve amps, Blackstar products have a reputation for bulletproof reliability. Here's how tone got tough

**L**ive music is a war zone. This world of rowdy fans, dubious venue wiring and van rides down potholed roads is a recipe to kill a valve amp. Unless it's a Blackstar. The tone might steal the headlines, but just as much knowledge and perspiration goes into ensuring these amps take the live circuit on the chin. "I don't think there's any reason why a Blackstar couldn't last you a lifetime," nods Ian Robinson. "As long as you don't drop it in a swimming pool."

It's no accident that a Blackstar amp stays bulletproof for its whole lifespan. All the classic valves might be present and correct – from the ECC83 to the EL34 – but that only tells half the story. "When we design these amps," says Ian, "we design out areas we know can add unreliability. Going deeper, we de-rate all the power-dissipating components much more aggressively than our

competitors. The components cost us more, because they're more reliable, because we're de-rating them."

It's no secret that Blackstar amps have some of the toughest construction around, with road-friendly features including plated-through double-sided PCBs, seam-welded steel chassis and finger-jointed birch ply cabinets. If there's a chink in the armour, meanwhile, the testing process will root it out. "We do hours and hours of testing," says Laurent Veignal. "We'll stress to the point of destruction, electronically as well. We'll look at the worst-case scenario, like someone playing a Mexican festival with a big heavy-metal sound for three days non-stop."

"The testing starts before an amp is even committed to a full design," confirms Ian. "We have an endurance room where we'll do reliability and accelerated lifetime testing. Plus, we're not just interested in whether an amp

passes the test. If something is going to fail, we want to know what it will be and how it will go. I can remember Richard Frost dropping Series One valve amps from over his head, just to see what would break. Of course, the valves would go. But then you'd put new valves back in and it would continue to work. So by the time the product gets to market, we're very confident that it's going to be reliable. And it gives us a bit of fun, throwing stuff around."

This obsessive testing is certainly reassuring for customers (as is the aftersales service department managed by Phil Gowers). But perhaps the ultimate testament to Blackstar reliability is that these amps have survived international touring duties with metal's most notorious hellraiser. "In 10 years," points out Paul Hayhoe, "we've never had a Series One transformer fail. And they've been on the road with Ozzy Osbourne..."



# FOR MUSICIANS. BY MUSICIANS

» With every Blackstar team member obsessed by guitars, passion flows into the products. Meet the engineers wielding pliers and plectrums

A passion for music runs strong in the veins of all company employees, so from boardroom (head of marketing, Joel Richardson, above with directors Ian, top, and Paul) to stage, you can guarantee that players' needs are at the forefront of development

**I**n some companies, it might raise eyebrows that the finance director collects guitars, rides a Harley to work and follows The Stranglers across the country. But then, as Alex Mathews reminds us, the folk at Blackstar live and breathe their profession: "This is a unique firm. The proportion of the team who play guitar here is very high. Even those who don't play have a passion for music. It's an important factor for the culture of the business."

Likewise, Blackstar's Northampton HQ is not your typical corporate stronghold. Stroll through the office and you'll find guitars leaning against desks, music posters and gig ticket stubs framed on the walls, records blaring, staff discussing the hottest new guitarists – not to mention their own musical aspirations. From service engineer Mat Day (a virtuoso blues player) to design engineer Marco Comunità (a stompbox obsessive from Rome), this is a team whose passion bleeds into

their products. "You start out as a music listener," considers the Italian, "then you start playing an instrument. Then you study electronics. Like everyone here, it starts as a love for music, then you wonder what you can do to contribute."

"Out of the 40 people here," says Joel Richardson, "we've got around 35 that play an instrument. That absolutely feeds into the work we're doing at Blackstar. It helps you understand what it's all about. It's in our vision and our values. It's a theme that runs across the company. You have to be a musician. You need to understand a player's needs."

It's true: the Blackstar team are able to anticipate the wishlist of players at every level, from the novice fretting his first chord in a bedroom to the megastar on the arena stage. "You've got everything from a £50 amp to a £1.5k hand-wired amp," explains marketing and artist liaison assistant James Evans. "As a young guitarist when I joined Blackstar, that was really important."

"One of the most memorable moments for me," reflects Joel, "was

when we signed up Gus G., who was with Ozzy at the time. He was playing the O2 Arena, and he had a wall of 12 Blackstar stacks. A pinch-yourself moment: we've got one of the best guitar players in the world, and he's playing with a wall of Blackstars. Then there was James Hetfield on the *Death Magnetic* tour. We brought down a Series One, he loved it – and that became his warm-up amp."

Just as music tastes at Blackstar HQ are dizzyingly eclectic, so the artist roster runs the gamut, from Nashville's most respected country players to the cream of Brit-rock. "James Dean Bradfield has been with us for a number of years," says Joel. "Steve Cradock is another one from that generation of indie and Britpop players. Gaz Coombes was another. All those guys have stayed with us. It's not just established artists we work with, it's also the hard-working up and coming bands, too, from all genres of music. Importantly, though, it's the guys that we had at the start that have stuck with us. Blackstar just gives them exactly what they want."



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

The four mavericks who shook up the amp world to create Blackstar: Ian Robinson, managing director; Paul Hayhoe, sales and marketing director; Richard Frost, special projects director; and Bruce Keir, technical director

# BACK IN BLACK

» In 2007, Bruce Keir, Ian Robinson, Paul Hayhoe and Richard Frost risked it all with a new breed of amp company. They reflect on the ride so far

**W**hen Blackstar set out in 2007, how did you want to be different?

**Bruce Keir (technical director):** “So much guitar amp design is recycled, and working in the shed was a very exciting time, because we knew that we wanted to raise the bar. We always wanted to know, ‘Well, why does it sound like that, and how can we make it sound better?’”

**Ian Robinson (managing director):** “For us, it was all about helping people get the sound in their heads. That was always the driving force for us.”

**Now 10 years on, why do you think Blackstar has been so successful?**

**Paul Hayhoe (sales and marketing director):** “The comment we get most from people is that they love the sound and reliability. They’ll tell us things like, ‘I can take it everywhere,’ ‘It makes my guitar sound the best’ and ‘It’s the sound I’ve been trying to get.’”

**Richard Frost (special projects director):** “People always like new things – but the proof of the pudding is if your product is actually really good and different. That’s the biggest thing that we’ve proved – that people like a good product.”

**What have been your favourite moments from the past decade?**

**Paul:** “There’s a whole load. That first prototype unit, when all the pictures and logos I’d drawn became a physical product – that was amazing.”

**Bruce:** “I suppose you could say that getting Blackstar established in the first place was a pivotal moment for us all. And the first trade show we did at Frankfurt. We’d spent so much time developing the technical ideas and the first products. So to walk into the Frankfurt Messe and see the stand and logo there, it felt like, ‘Right, this is a big point now.’”

**When did you realise that Blackstar was really taking off?**

**Richard:** “I think the HT-5 will go down as one of the pivotal product releases. Obviously, the Artisan and Series One were great, but from the point of view of people being aware of Blackstar, the HT-5 went absolutely vertical. We couldn’t make them quick enough. And then obviously, after that, something like the HT Venue, which was a success straight out of the gate.”

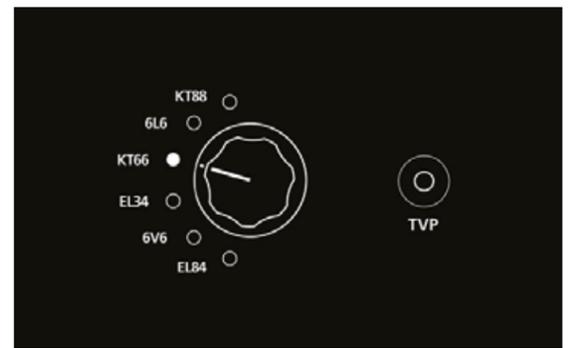
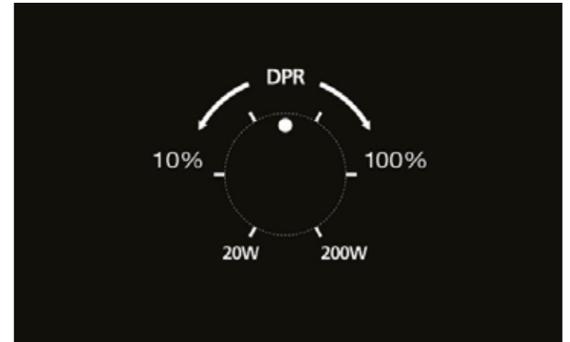
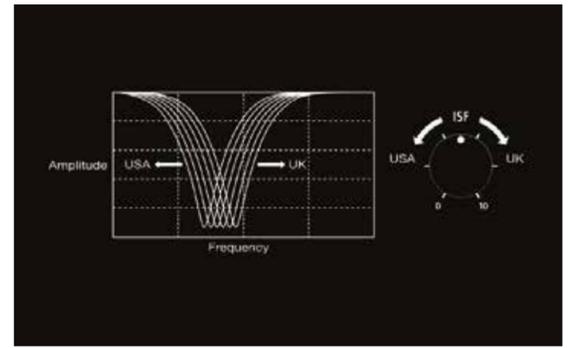
**Do you think you’ve stayed true to your original mission?**

**Bruce:** “Yes, I do. That tagline – ‘The Sound In Your Head’ – I think we have met that.”

**How does it feel now to reach that decade milestone?**

**Richard:** “Most of the time, the time goes so quickly that you struggle to keep a good view on how long it’s been. When you think back to the shed, it feels like it was only a couple of years ago. Then you look at the dates and realise it was 10 years. There aren’t many companies that have managed to take it to the same level.”

**Ian:** “When you run a business, you don’t necessarily see the overall growth or achievement. But I try to remind myself and the other guys that we should be proud. We’ve established a global, market-leading brand, and stayed completely true to our principles – in 10 years. I think Blackstar has made a big impact on the music scene and the music that people are playing. That’s something we should all definitely be proud of.”



# BRIGHT SPARKS

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** The humble shed in Ian Robinson's Northampton back garden where it all began; three game-changing patents from Blackstar – Infinite Shape Feature (ISF), Dynamic Power Reduction (DPR) and True Valve Power (TVP)

» In an industry where others tread water, Blackstar made quantum leaps and pushed amp design forward with three patented brainwaves

**R**ewind to 2004 and Blackstar's original HQ, a Northampton garden shed, it hardly looked like the epicentre of an amplifier revolution. And yet, from this makeshift base, Bruce Keir and Ian Robinson dreamt up the technical quantum leaps that would fire the imagination of countless players across every genre.

"We had the luxury of Bruce's massive brain and three years of research," recalls Paul Hayhoe. "There were no sacred cows. A lot of things haven't changed in amplification for 60 years. So we'd go, 'Okay, that's the way it's done – but is that the best?' If it isn't, we'll do whatever the better solution is."

Pop the bonnet of a Blackstar and you'll find patented tech offering real-world benefits, from the Infinite Shape Feature (ISF), Dynamic Power Reduction (DPR) or True Valve Power (TVP). "ISF came about because we wanted to get a big-name artist by giving them the ability to choose any sound,"

explains Ian. "We had 10 different versions of the tone stack, letting you voice the amp anywhere – but with one dial and the same response between bass, middle and treble as you'd feel with a normal tone stack. We realised: 'This should be a standard feature.'

"ISF was a lightbulb moment," he adds. "From Leo Fender putting a mid on in the 50s to when we launched the first ISF product, there had been no step forward in terms of the tone stack."

Even failure can spark an innovation. After an early attempt to create a power soak device hit a wall, the team took it as the jump-off for DPR, which solved the age-old dilemma of reducing valve amp volume without killing tone. "There are power attenuators and half-power switches," explains Bruce, "but they never retain the transparency of the amp. You reduce the power, but it doesn't sound like the amp is quieter. It sounds like a completely different amp."

"Other people have reduced the voltages," picks up Ian, "but when you play an amp that's got static power

reduction, you get a nasty, crackly breakup. DPR does it dynamically, so when you're playing guitar really quietly, there's no power reduction, but when you hit the guitar, it's applied. The other big step forward is that DPR retains the damping characteristic between the power amp and the loudspeaker. It still gives you the same feel. So again, it was overcoming a practical limitation of the existing methods.

"TVP was something we thought about in the shed era, too," adds Ian. "Wouldn't it be great to have a solid-state amp that replicated the responses, very accurately, of the different valve types? You need about two-and-a-half times the power in a solid-state design to capture the same dynamic response. But the clever bit of TVP is that you don't need the same headroom at all frequencies. We managed to implement this Shangri-La of a solid-state power amp that sounds, feels and responds the same as a valve amp. With us, it's never science for the sake of it; it's always about solving a problem."

PRODUCT PROFILE

# ARTISAN

» Kick-starting the brand in 2007, Blackstar's award-winning hand-wired amp series raised the bar to heights where other builders fear to tread

**T**he history books will tell you that the Artisan debuted in 2007, planting the flag for the fledgling Blackstar brand, sweeping up accolades and storming pro stages. "A great moment for me," recalls Ian Robinson, "was when we got the *Guitarist* 'Gold' award for the Artisan 30. That was basically our first amp that was ever reviewed – and we got the absolute highest accolade from Nick Guppy, who was a journalist we all respected. We thought we must be onto something good; it justified our decision to go our own way."

It's true: few valve amps have made such a seismic impact in the post-millennium. Yet in reality, the roots of the Artisan can be traced back through the decades, to an electronics-obsessed teenager living in northern England. "When I was young, some engineers came to refurbish the radio transmitters," remembers Bruce Keir, "and left behind a big pile of redundant equipment. I was keen to see what I could do with it, in terms of understanding how it worked. My older brother kept pestering me to design a guitar amp, so this big mound of surplus electronics – that's how I set out."

"The Artisan harks back to my interest in electronics in the first place," he adds. "It's an important series for us, because it's a hand-wired amp. Obviously, the production time and the cost of producing it is relatively high compared to a PCB design. But again, it is the equipment I cut my teeth on."

Examine the Artisans today and you'll see that backstory represented in the thrilling collision of forensic old-school construction and innovative modern touches. "The way Bruce designed the Artisan, in terms of the tagboard, the layout," says Paul Hayhoe, "they don't look like other hand-wired amps. They're meticulously designed and so neat; that's because of Bruce's experiences,

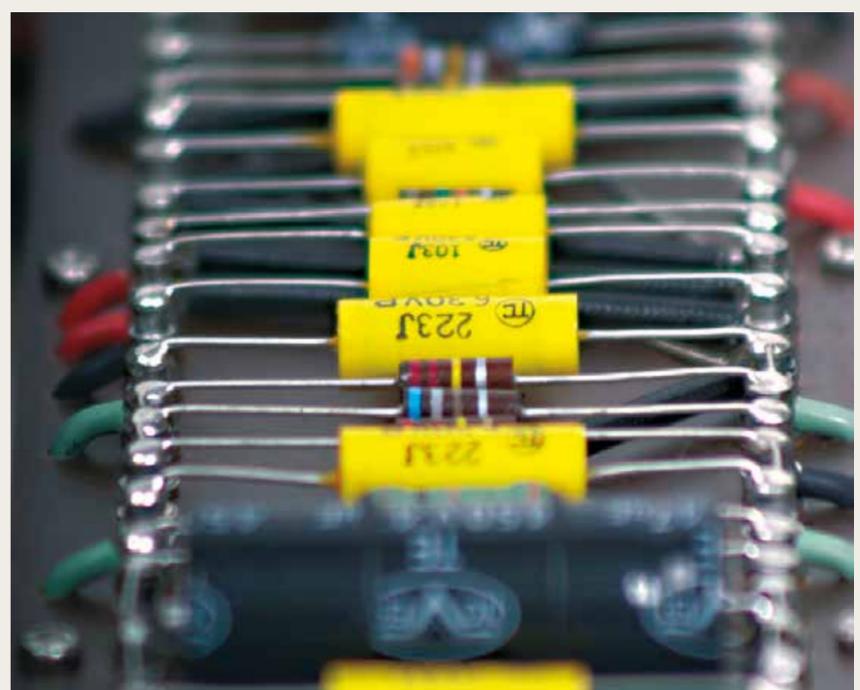
back when radio transmitters and everything else was all point-to-point valve. He won't accept second-best."

The vintage red Tolex, engraved 'running wheat' design and welded steel chassis make the Artisan the smartest (and toughest) stage furniture around, but it's the powerful, responsive and astonishingly pure tone that separates this amp series from the chasing pack. "Clarity," says Ian. "That's what it's all about. When you're playing with overdrive, you might have a lot of notes, but you can hear every last one. All that muddiness you get with other makes – that doesn't exist with the Artisan."

While the Artisan's crystalline voicings are built on the foundation of ECC83/EF86 preamp and EL84 power valves in the combos and EL34s in the 100-watt head, it's ultimately the intensive hours spent cross-referencing – and improving on – history's greatest point-to-point hand-wired amp tones that has elevated this series to its hallowed status. "Those reference amps don't always meet your expectations in terms of sound," says Paul. "So the whole point of the Artisan was that we refined the tone. When you plug in, it sounds like what you think a great hand-wired amp should sound like. It's a professional choice, but a different flavour."

In fact, with features including channel blending, switchable triode/pentode modes and the 100 model's Voice control that tailors the preamp and power amp to take a player anywhere between 50s US tone and late 60s British crunch, the Artisan represents a kaleidoscope of sonic flavours. No wonder it's pricked up some of the most discerning ears in the business, drawing users as diverse as Billy Gibbons, James Dean Bradfield, Richard Hawley and Uli Jon Roth. "At last," Pat Travers famously exclaimed after trying an Artisan 100, in a soundbite that nailed the appeal. "I can hear my \$8,000 guitar..."

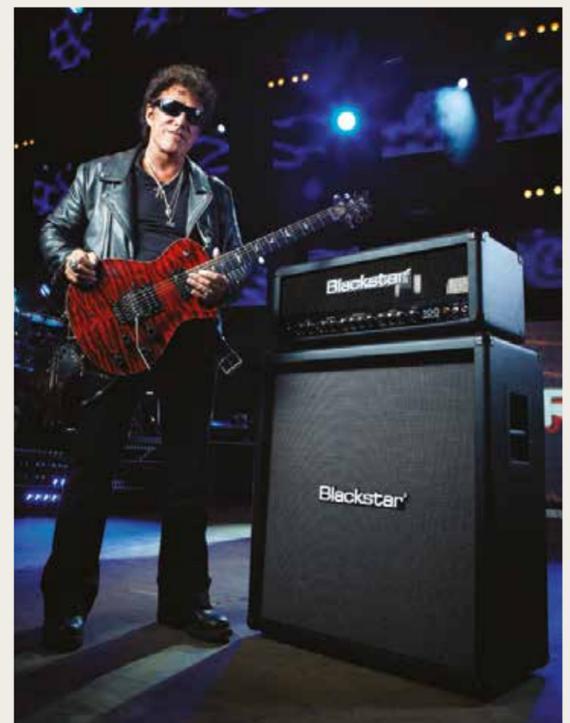




The hand-wired Artisan series was a labour of love for technical director, Bruce Keir, referencing the radio transmitters of his youth that initially fired his interest in electronics. The immaculately wired tagboards within (pictured above) are testament to their old-school influence



The Blackstar team set a stratospheric target for the Series One: "The aim was to build the world's best-sounding and most flexible traditional valve amp," says Ian Robinson. And boy did they deliver, with pros as diverse as (L-R below) country player Joe Don Rooney, metallor Gus G. and Journey legend Neal Schon plugging in on stage



## PRODUCT PROFILE

## SERIES ONE

» **Two patents. No limits. Back in 2007, the Series One launched the Blackstar brand into orbit, and it's still the pros' choice today**

**T** here comes a time when every promising amp-builder must deliver on its potential. And with the Series One, Blackstar turned from plucky underdog to heavyweight contender. Launched alongside the Artisan in 2007, this was an amp that realised Blackstar's towering ambitions and threw down a gauntlet. "It had to be the flagship," remembers Paul Hayhoe. "It had to showcase the Blackstar philosophy. It had to tell people, 'This is what we're all about.'"

Perhaps above all, what the Series One represented on its launch was innovation, on a scale that hadn't been seen in the staid valve amp sector since the golden age of the 50s. At a time when the typical valve head forced its users to accept a single prescribed tone, the Series One's unprecedented dual-patent design allowed flexible operation and limitless tweaking. "It was a very special amp for us," says Bruce Keir, "because it brought in the ISF and DPR. Those features are both there to aid the guitarist. It's all about the 'sound in your head', not necessarily the sound in our heads. Quite rightly, we all have different expectations and desires in terms of what happens when you plug into a guitar amp."

"Effectively, the ISF enabled you to voice the Series One anywhere, from a Fender or a Boogie tone stack right through to a Marshall and beyond," explains Paul. "But the key thing is that it's infinite, so it's anywhere in-between. So you actually get your own sound. The DPR meant the Series One was a valve amp that you could use at different volume levels, yet it still had the sound and response of your amp – which had been the Holy Grail since forever."

Before the Series One was born, valve amps came with a compromise. Some on the market offered a classy clean channel but came with a puny overdrive. Others out there delivered

mighty gain but came with thin raw tone. None excelled on both fronts. "So the aim with the Series One was to build the world's best-sounding and most flexible traditional valve amp," says Ian Robinson. "Our approach was that it would have the optimum clean and overdrive sounds we could design. We spent a lot of time on each sound, down in the shed, with every reference you can imagine, making each sound the best it could be. Quite often, you have a circuit and the whole thing is designed homogeneously. This isn't. We designed the Series One almost like four separate amps."

Even with up to four-channel selection via MIDI or footswitch, the team took pains to ensure the Series One had a clear identity. "How do you go between each of the channels and not feel like you've got four different amps?" considers Ian. "As a guitarist, you don't want to feel like you're always plugging into a totally different amp. So that was the challenge – to have no compromise and also make the amp sit together as a product."

10 years down the line, the Series One's enduring success in head and combo formats confirms that Blackstar nailed the brief. In 2017, following a starburst of awards including the coveted *Guitarist* 'Choice' and 'Gold' Awards, and *Total Guitar's* 'Best Buy' award, this tough, toneful, versatile amp range is one of the brightest constellations in the Blackstar firmament and a go-to choice for ambitious musicians and A-list stars. "We achieved it," reflects Ian. "An amp that integrates all those features and still has that holistic feel. One that's so good at cleans that you have some of the top Nashville players using it. And it's so good at overdrives that you've got Gus G. and Silenoz [Dimmu Borgir] using it. And it's so good at crunch that you've got guys like James Dean Bradfield using it. It's a phenomenal achievement, really..."

## PRODUCT PROFILE

# HT VENUE MKII

» How do you top the all-conquering valve series that blew the roof off the live circuit? With the new and improved HT Venue MkII

**R**ight now, somewhere in the world, it's a safe bet that someone is gigging an original Blackstar HT Venue. Launched in 2010, this valve road warrior announced itself as the ultimate working musician's amp, demanding a place in your van by being sweet-sounding enough to tame the crowd in any venue and tough enough to ride shotgun all night in the hold.

A less innovative amp-builder might have been content to rest on its laurels and watch the sales rack up, but as this year's launch of the HT Venue MkII reminds us, that's not the Blackstar way. "We didn't want to break HT Venue," reflects Joel Richardson. "For a lot of people, that line was their introduction to Blackstar. This new series is everything that people have been asking for. It's giving them what they wanted. But more – and better."

Sequels can be on thin ice. But the HT Venue MkII runs with the core DNA of the *Guitarist* 'Choice' Award-winning original – the valve power, the ISF, the rugged construction – while raising the spec with a fistful of developments inspired by listening to the musician on the street. "It maintains all the great things about the HT Venue, but it's a floor-up redesign," says Ian Robinson. "We've paid attention to what people liked about the original, and decided where we can improve it. We're seven years on now. We've learnt so much."

The MkII was a true group effort, with Blackstar's fluid departmental structure meaning that development involved everyone from senior design engineer Paul Stevens (responsible for schematics and PCB) to digital product team leader Dan Wright (who worked on tweaking voicings). "The MkII had to be a team thing," explains Paul, "because there's just so much going on."

And how. From the moment that the cable hits the input jack, the

MkII's improvements start to reveal themselves. "The clean channel sounds – the whole topology – is so much improved," explains Paul. "We really spent a lot of time tweaking things, A/B-ing with the old HT Venues and other historic reference amps. Each time we thought we were done, we'd listen again – then tweak it one more time. It's just about getting closer to – dare I say it – perfection."

"There are two modes on the clean channel," adds Ian, "so you've got the sound of two £2,000 amps, just with that one button. We've increased the flexibility of the overdrive significantly, too: you've got two modes on each overdrive channel, so that's effectively four overdrives. We've also integrated a version of our HT Metal sounds into the MkII, so you've got the pristine cleans and amazing crunches we've always been renowned for – but the high-gain metal stuff as well. Plus, with MkII, we've been listening to thousand-pound rack systems to get absolutely the best studio-quality reverb. Every single part of it has been improved."

The modern working musician pinballs between stage, studio and home production, and the Blackstar team were keen to address each scenario you might encounter. "The MkII has push-button power reduction," explains Paul Hayhoe. "For gigging, they're more compact and lightweight, and another key thing that everyone's been asking for is to make all the modes footswitchable, so that gives you a lot more flexibility live. The other addition is a four-channel USB Out with reamping – because everyone loves recording at home."

If it ain't broke, as they say, don't fix it. Granted, drilling into the all-conquering HT Venue series might have been a risk, but the MkII is the proof that, in Blackstar's hands, even a benchmark can move forward. "We're a 21st century company," says Paul Stevens, "and this is a 21st century amp."

Seven years on from the launch of the HT Venue, this year's MkII raises with the bar even further, with greater flexibility, more tonal choice, and a lighter weight to present a truly versatile modern workhorse for stage and studio



# DIGITAL PRODUCTS

» Blackstar might have debuted as a valve specialist, but digital was always part of the vision. Here's how the ID:Series silenced the doubters

**A** nalogue. Digital. While less open-minded amp-builders and musicians draw battlelines between these two schools of tech, Blackstar has always recognised that each sector has unique merits and drawbacks. “There are certain things you can only do with valves,” says Bruce Keir, “and other things that you have to do with signal processing.”

As such, while Blackstar’s earliest 2007 amps were powered by valves, secret plans were afoot under cover of darkness. “Back then, in the daytime, Bruce would be in the shed, working on our valve amps, the Series One and Artisan,” remembers Paul Hayhoe. “But in the evening, he’d go home and work on the digital algorithms that eventually got developed into the ID:Series. It was the culmination of his life’s work, really.”

There was a time when the pub bore would insist that valves were intrinsically ‘better’ than digital, and that solid-state combos were strictly for teenage players forced to compromise by

financial necessity. The ID:Series – and its stripped-back sibling, ID:Core – can take much of the credit for smashing that perception. “When I came onboard, essentially as part of the team to start the digital world for Blackstar,” recalls digital product team leader Dan Wright, “the public had a very different attitude towards digital. Then we brought out the ID:Series. The perception has shifted.”

Out of leftfield, the ID:Series touched down in 2012 to a flurry of media awards and public acclaim. At last, a digital amp series that delivered at a professional level. True Valve Power (TVP) let players choose between six power valve responses. ISF, onboard digital effects and six Voice options unlocked every tone in the book. Plus, when a guitarist dreamt up a bespoke tone, it could be shot through a USB port for recording or sharing. But the real line in the sand was the tone. “Bruce has always said there’s no reason a digital amp can’t sound as good as valve,” says Paul, “as long as you have the understanding of how the valve amp works, then apply that to the digital world. I remember taking

an ID:Series prototype to America and showing it to one of the big retail chains. And he asked me, ‘Well, how did you get all those valves in there...?’”

For Blackstar, digital isn’t a sector to dabble in, but a vital strand of the company’s ongoing work. A given team member might work on the Artisan by day and the ID:Core by night. An amp might feature valves, DSP – or a fusion of both. “As far as we’re concerned,” explains Dan, “we do things because they sound best, not because ‘that’s how it was done in 1960s’. We approach it from an engineering point of view. We’re not precious in terms of historical stuff. It’s whatever is the best solution to deliver the best sound. It’s whatever gives people what they want to use.”

And as Ian Robinson reminds us, the ID:Series is just the start. “When you design a valve amp, you’re somewhat restricted by the laws of physics,” he points out. “The exciting thing about digital products is that those physical laws can be changed. So if you ask if there’s gas in the tank for digital stuff – the potential is huge.”



Blackstar spearheaded the digital amplification revolution with the ID:Series family of amps, harnessing technology to go beyond the restrictions of valves for a future of professional, customisable tone

PRODUCT PROFILE

# BLACKSTAR CATALOGUE

» It began with high-end valve amps, but Blackstar has grown to address the needs of every player – whoever you are, whatever you play

**A**n amp for everyone, regardless of budget, ability or musical taste. It might sound like a utopian fantasy – or a flat-out denial of market economics – but over the past decade, the Blackstar product catalogue has advanced into every sector and price-point, levelling an industry that has historically been built on elitism. Back in 2007, the firm made early headlines for its flagship valve amps, picked out by professionals at the highest level. Yet every bit as central to the Blackstar range are the products that arm working bands and aspirant players.

“Right from the start, we wanted a full catalogue of products,” says Paul Hayhoe. “We didn’t want to be a niche high-end brand. So we started at the top, cut our teeth with what is perceived as the top of the line – valve amps. But then we came down through the price-points to provide an affordable amp for everyone that will deliver the best in tone, features and innovation.”

In 2017, the Blackstar product range runs the gamut. The Artisan, Series One and Artist represent the finest in modern valve amplification. The HT family spans from the gain-heavy HT Metal series to the studio-friendly HT-1 and 5 range. The ID:Series rewrites the digital rulebook, the ID:Core slashes the price, while the ID:Core BEAM debuts Bluetooth tech that means your amp doubles as a home entertainment system. “ID:Core was revolutionary for us,” says Dan Wright, “because it showed us that we could do something at a price point that gave players the feeling of standing in front of a huge wall of stacks in your bedroom.”

With its ISF tone-shaping and tape delay, the LT-Echo redefines expectations for a practice amp. The HT pedal range puts valve tone under your boots (while the LT stompers keep it under your budget). Meanwhile, for musicians on the move, there’s the Fly range, its concept born when Ian Robinson wondered why AC/DC’s *Back In Black* rocked on a quality digital radio, when the same riff sounded terrible

through a mini amp. “Mini amps were seen as toys, just a novelty. We looked at the power amps, looked at the speakers. Basically, inside the Fly, there’s a really well-designed little linear speaker. It’s a totally different approach.”

“The Fly is a three-watt mini amp,” adds Joel Richardson, “but it’s a great-sounding little amp. Paul Draper, who was the guitar player in Mansun and a great producer, has recorded with a Fly. The Quireboys recorded a whole album with one. Richard Hawley also recorded with a Fly, and he goes out and does small live dates with it, too. Crazy stuff. And then, with the Fly Bass – there just wasn’t anything like that for bass players on the market.”

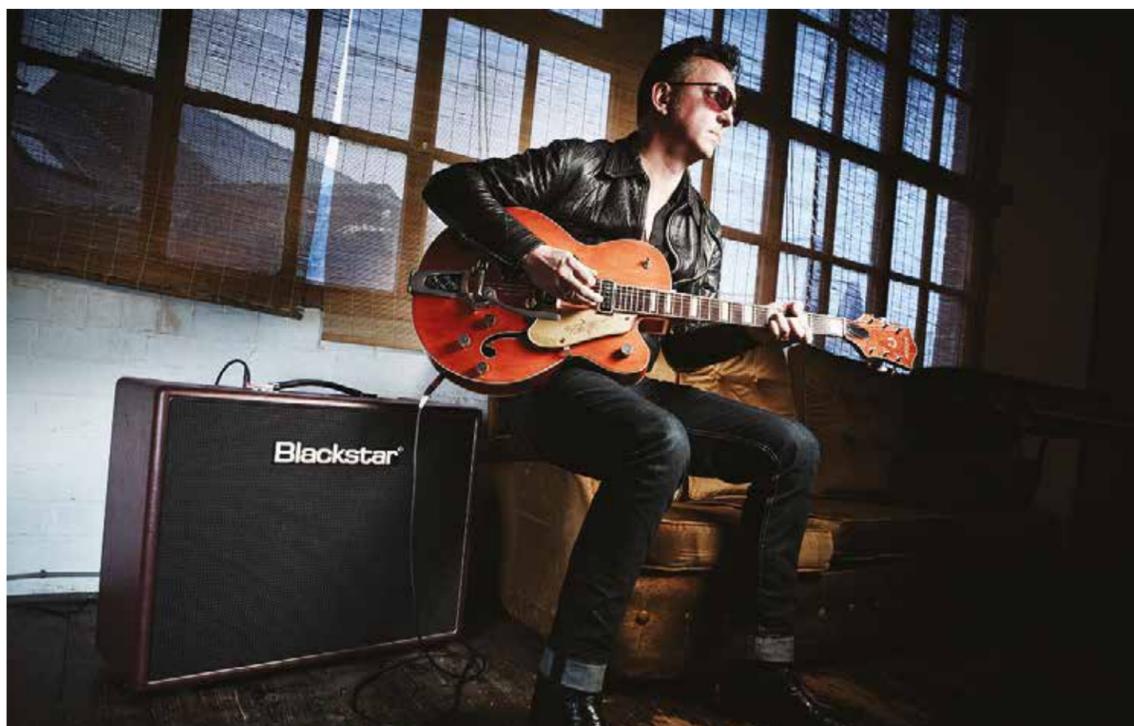
It’s all evidence of Blackstar’s commitment to providing the backline for every player, whether they’re playing a stadium, pub or bedsit. “It’s essential for us to make great amps for the average musician,” says Paul. “We’ve all been in bands, we’ve all had that dream, and it’s a passion you never shake off. We do as much as we can to support and inspire those players.”

Blackstar’s innovative catalogue of products includes the Fly 3, which is more than just a mini amp; it’s also able to act as a portable speaker system for quality sounds on the move

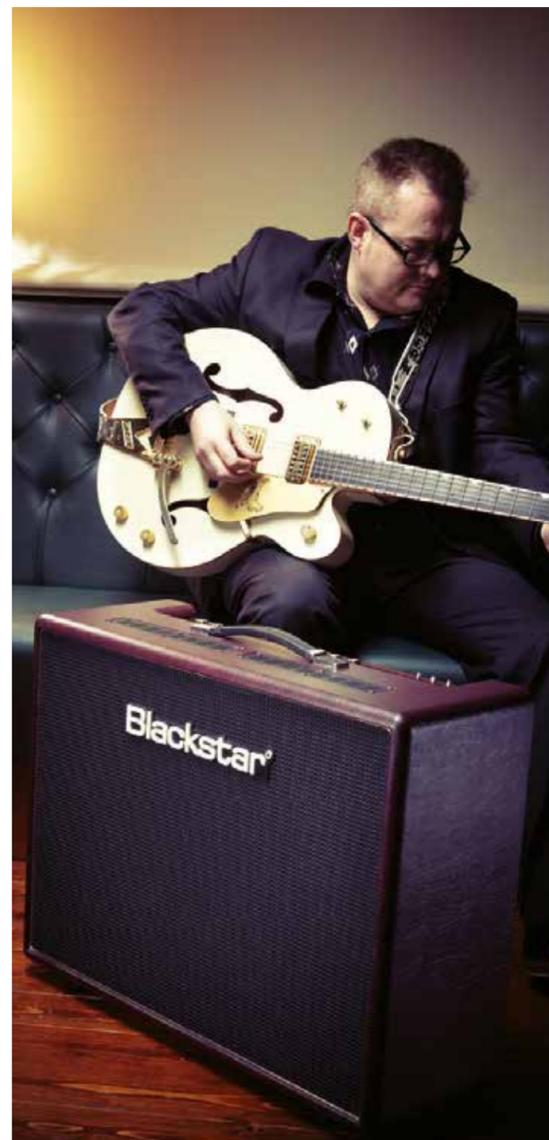


# BLACKSTAR ARTISTS

» From big-star household names to the next big thing on the scene, Blackstar's artist roster reaches across every genre to deliver pro tone



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Mercury-nominated Richard Hawley, Polecats and Morrissey guitarist Boz Boorer, and blues rocker Jared James Nichols are just a selection of the top-class artists making Blackstar their go-to name for amplification



**T**ake a look at the Blackstar artist roster and you'll find some of the most influential guitarists in the world using Blackstar amps from every genre, plus a host of up and coming players. Someone has to be responsible for supporting them and spotting the next big thing – is this the best job in the world?

Joel Richardson, Blackstar's head of marketing, spent the first 18 months after the brand's launch driving up and down the motorway with a car full of Artisan hand-wired amps and valve HT Pedals to a long list of artists he knew. "After all the years of undercover research in the garden shed and planning around Ian's kitchen table, we were finally getting the products in front of artists. The response was amazing."

Funeral For a Friend were met on tour during a soundcheck in Cambridge and

tried the Artisan 30. By the time the band went on stage, it was incorporated into Darran Smith's rig. "That's pretty much the way it went," smiles Joel. "I also travelled to Sheffield to meet Pat Travers to demo the amps. He loved the Artisan 100 so much he used it that night and still uses it 10 years on. Steve Cradock tried a prototype Artisan 30 and that's been the base of his sound ever since."

"We were all so proud when James Hetfield put a Series One in the Metallica live room," Joel adds, "and just as thrilled when Billy F. Gibbons started using an Artisan 15. He tried one in a Guitar Center, and after jamming for two hours he called me asking for three amps!"

"It's important to remember that we don't pay people to use our amps," adds Paul Hayhoe. "They use them because a Blackstar gives them the sound they're looking for and is absolutely bulletproof in terms of reliability."

"Our amps are used by players from every genre," Joel reminds us. "We have country players like Luke Bryan and Joe Don Rooney using the Series One 200, the same amp played by Silenoz from Dimmu Borgir and Gus G. from Firewind. It shows the versatility designed into a Blackstar amp."

Today, artist support is handled by James Evans in the Northampton HQ and Will Jakeway in an office at the John Henry rehearsal studios in London. "We have so many artists," says Will, "that it's convenient to have a base in London. Here we can introduce Blackstar to new players and support our existing artists, sometimes at very short notice..."

So what's next? "We're continually looking for new artists to use Blackstar," says Joel. "Whether you play rock or punk, country or jazz, you've just been signed or you're playing Wembley – we want you to try a Blackstar!"

# Celebrating 10 years of the sound in your head with...



**James Williamson**  
Iggy & the Stooges

"From the first time I fired up the Blackstar Artisan 30H... Wow, wow, wow... it sounded fantastic!"  
(Artisan 30H user since 2009)



**Tommy Henriksen**  
Alice Cooper

"I hit an 'A' chord and the Series One 104EL34 screamed 'F\*CK YOU!' I knew I was in love!!"  
(Series One 104EL34 user since 2011)



**Nicke Borg**  
Backyard Babies

"I need to be able to go from 0-100 in seconds. That's why I drive a Chrysler 300C and play a Blackstar Series One 100."  
(Series One 100 user since 2009)



**Gaz Coombes**  
Supergrass

"The Artisan 30 has all the vintage tones in one box."  
(Artisan 30 user since 2008)



**Silenoz**  
Dimmu Borgir

"The Series One 200 is the very definition of guitar sound and will break new ground – mark my words!"  
(Series One 200 user since 2007)



**Boz Boorer**  
Morrissey

"It's nice to see the reliability and class of British engineering and design is alive and living under the banner of Blackstar Amplification."  
(Artisan 30 user since 2009)



**Billy Lunn**  
The Subways

"This is how we make buildings fall down."  
(Artisan 30 user since 2008)



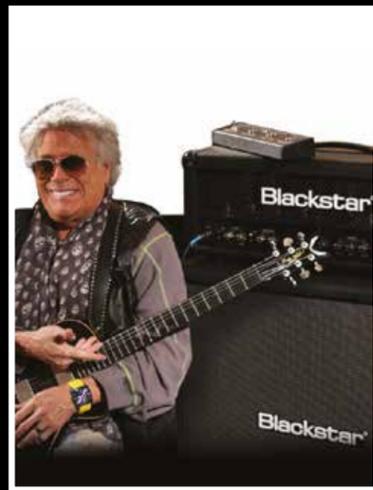
**Mike Spreitzer**  
DevilDriver

"The Blackstar Series One 1046L6 is a BEAST of an amp! Versatile and reliable... through and throughout."  
(Series One 1046L6 user since 2012)



**Richard Hawley**

"When I first plugged my guitar into the Artisan 30 I was immediately smitten. When you play quiet it responds and when you dig in it follows you. I love it."  
(Artisan 30 user since 2012)



**Leslie West**  
Mountain

"Open the throttle up and go into overdrive."  
(Series One 100 user since 2011)



**Alex Robertshaw**  
Everything Everything

"The Artisan 30 is the best amp I've used."  
(Artisan 30 user since 2014)



**Pat Travers**  
The Pat Travers Band

"The Artisan 100 is the best amp I have ever plugged a guitar into."  
(Artisan 100 user since 2007)

...and all the other Blackstar players around the world.



"I was knocked out by the tone of the Artisan 30. It's a testament to Blackstar that 10 years on mine are still going strong."

Steve Cradock - Ocean Colour Scene, Paul Weller

**Blackstar**<sup>®</sup>  
AMPLIFICATION

the sound in your head

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by Blackstar Amplification UK

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