

ACG

Retro B J4

A gift for the masses from the workbench of AC Guitars...
Mike Brooks takes a look under the bonnet

AC Guitars
www.acguitars.co.uk

£1975

Much as they might try to avoid the most popular bass design on the planet, most luthiers eventually succumb to the charms of the Fender Jazz style. However, not every instrument influenced by the Jazz has to copy its every feature; smart designers can still come up with new variations on the classic template, while appealing to the legions of players who admire it. With the Retro B J4 luthier Alan Cringean has attempted to come up with a bass that should appeal to both Jazz fans and those looking for a bass that's great on its own merits.

Build Quality

With an alder body core and a figured maple top that transitions from green to purple, the new ACG is a guaranteed eye-catcher. The exposed upper bout and contour provide a hint at the underlying timber, and the contrast between the body top and the pale bleached maple fingerboard is striking. The offset body shape feels familiar – but without a scratchplate and chrome control detail, the bass looks and feels somehow cleaner. The rear contour ensures that the bass fits snugly against the player's body, while the cutaways offer good access to the acrylic impregnated 22-fret fingerboard.

Finished in a satin lacquer, the instrument has a smooth, soft feel that belies its solidity – that's 'solidity' not 'weight'; at 3.5 kg (7.7 lbs), this is a back-friendly instrument, despite some headstock bias when it's not on a strap. Attention to detail across the whole instrument is exemplary; a Neutrik locking jack socket has been included along with a Hipshot B-type bridge and string tree, Gotoh GB 7 machine heads and Dunlop straplocks. The full D-shaped neck profile is pleasingly playable and

works well with the 'infinite radius' flat fingerboard and 19mm string spacing. With no sharp fret ends anywhere on the neck, anyone who plays this is in for a very comfortable experience.

The electronics package is calculated to produce the goods. A pair of ACG-designed soapbar pickups are matched with an ACG circuit designed in conjunction with circuit wizard John East. The Uni-Pre 4K is fully featured, with volume, pan, bass, treble, mid with mid-sweep controls, alongside a treble boost facility for biting top end. There's also a passive tone control. This functions in both active and passive modes, which can be selected using a push/pull function on the same control.

Sounds and Playability

Cringean's attention to the tonal performance of his instruments has yielded a noticeable acoustic tone in the Retro B J4. With a bolt-on neck attachment, the expected spring and bounce is already evident – and holding the bass against your body, you can feel the vibration of all four strings. The sustain and resonating qualities of the timbers are impressive.

Plugging in, what have we got? With the EQ set flat and the passive tone wide open, a woody tone can be clearly heard. The use of soapbars instead of single-coil pickups means a regular Jazz bass tone isn't automatically available, but the sound is still crisp and throaty, with a smoothness in the lower register. Active and passive modes operate at an almost equal volume, so should you need to switch over to passive mode in a dead-battery emergency you won't be faced with a drastic drop in output. Panning between the pickups shows a good degree of tonal change, and a fair amount of ground can be covered without even touching the EQ.

That said, if extensive EQ options are your thing, the East-supplied circuitry is blessed with an extensive selection of robust tones. As with most East circuits, a minor adjustment to the controls can effect radical changes to your tone, so cut and boost with caution. The mid-sweep facility is particularly useful in giving your signal some extra projection, especially in the low-mid department for extra punch. If you're a slapper or tapper, or if you just like your tone to sizzle, the treble boost will give you that extra glassiness.

ACG basses are well regarded for their playability, and this bass is following in that tradition. The neck is supremely comfortable, while the flat fingerboard provides an effortless performance across the whole register. The setup is excellent, with almost no fret buzz.

Conclusion

At a fraction under £2k, this is an enjoyable bass that won't break the bank. It doesn't matter that it isn't a traditional Jazz bass in terms of looks or core tone. It justifies every penny of its pricetag. We're very impressed. ■

Review conducted at the Great British Bass Lounge. www.facebook.com/greatbritishbasslounge



