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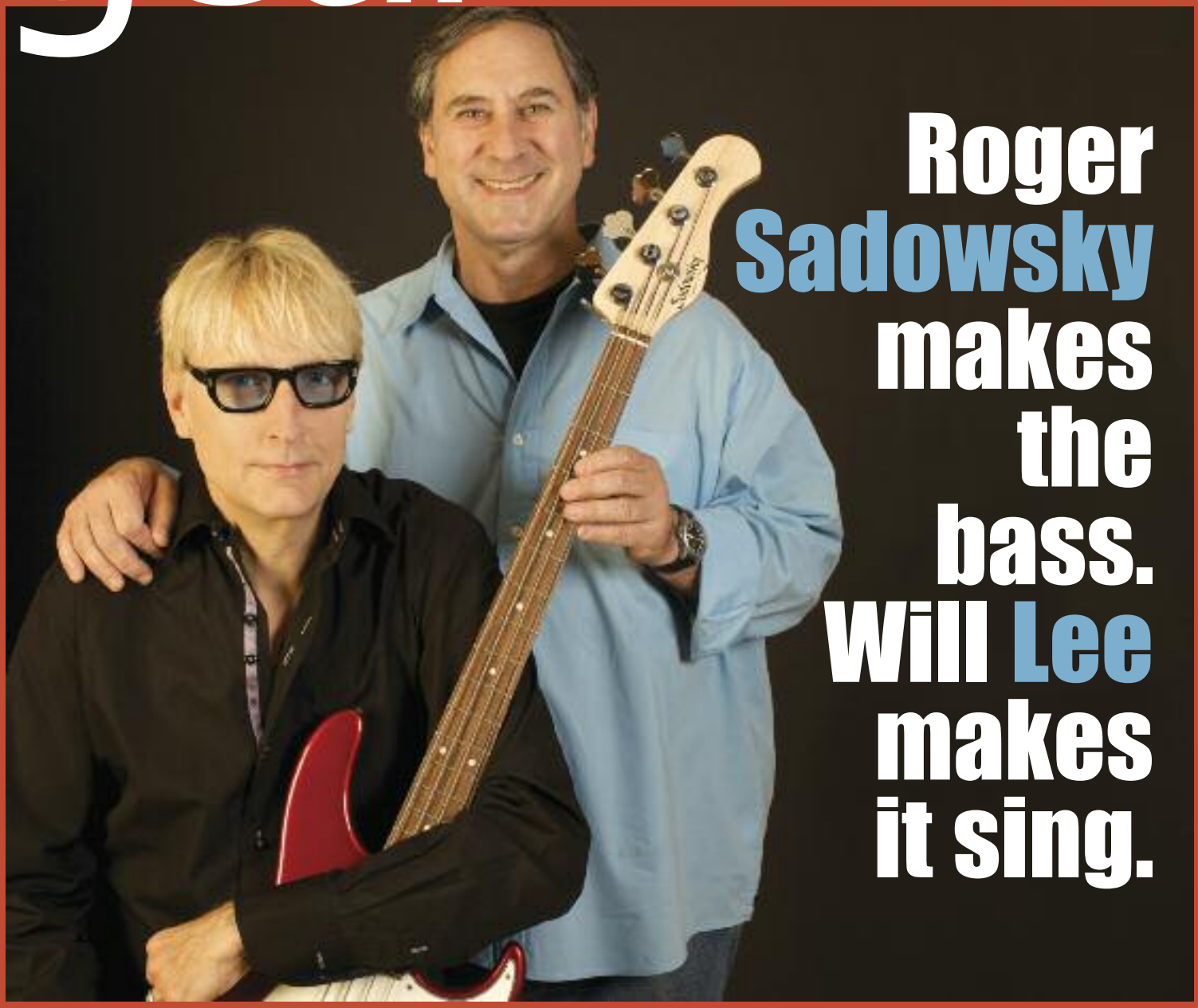

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In the Doghouse

Chris Fitzgerald

Phil Jones Flightcase Combos

Up until now, we've talked almost exclusively about double bass amplification issues related to mixing mic and pickup signals. In the future, there will be a number of gear reviews mixed in with the general topics. To start the gear reviews off on the right foot, I'll be discussing two small combo amps from Phil Jones Bass: The Flightcase BG-150, and the Super Flightcase BG-300. Both share basic platform features, including identical preamp configurations and deep (but light) front-ported cabinet designs featuring 5" neodymium drivers – two of which point upward toward the player as monitors.

Both amps are basically the same, except for differences related to the power section and the number of drivers. Both are single-channel amps designed to produce a clean, quick, detailed and warm sound for live sound applications. Although I experimented with ways to mix a mic into the signal a few times, this review will focus on the performance of these combos as a "regular" double bass combo amp – in this case, amplifying a bass equipped with a Fishman Full Circle pickup, with no buffer preamp. Pure plug and play. We did not perform any in-house bench testing of these combos (yet).

Input Impedance and "Flat" Tone

The first thing I noticed upon plugging in and starting to play was the sweetness of the sound when set completely flat (controls at noon). This has to do with many factors related to the overall design of the amp, but the first of these in the signal chain is the input impedance. Most piezo pickups like to see an impedance load of anywhere from 1-10 megohms to sound their best. But within this range, there is a great deal of tonal variation. For instance, the Acoustic Image amp heads that I've been using for years have an input impedance of 1 megohm. An outboard preamp which I sometimes use, the HPF-Pre (made by Francis Deck and affectionately known as the "fdeck pre"), has an input impedance of 10 megohm. The AI impedance load (with my gear) produces a basic tone which could be described as "uncolored" by those being charitable, and "sterile" by those being less so. In either case, to me it sounds uncolored, meaning that what goes in is what comes out. The fdeck pre impedance load, on the other hand, seems to color the sound of the Full Circle quite a bit, adding a lot of cushy and sometimes even "rubbery" or "gooey" bottom end to the sound.

The Flightcase input impedance is set at 4.7 megohm, which seems to capture the best of both worlds – colored enough to sound full and warm, but not so much so as to seem steroidal or artificial. By way of comparison, when the AI or fdeck input stages were placed in front of the PJB input stage, they sounded exactly like themselves when run through the PJB preamp. In short, the PJB input stage sounds just right, whether through the built-in speaker cab or through the direct out to the board.

After the input impedance stage, the next identifying feature of any amp is the basic overall vibe of the preamp when set flat. Does it sound bright or dark, warm or cold, round or jagged? Clearly these descriptive words are not at all scientific, and yet they are sometimes the best we can do in a review setting. Beyond these words, I think the rest is best left to soundclips and specs, and since I'm a player and not a techie, I'll supply links to the former later on in this article and leave the latter to the experts. In the case of the Phil Jones preamp, I can say that it does a better job of reproducing the sound I'd like to hear out of my pickup signal with the EQ section set completely flat than any other amp I've yet experienced. When I plug my bass into most amps, I usually have to start by cutting a fair amount of highs, and then cut some mids as well, to get the amplified pickup signal to sound more bass-like. With the Flightcase amps, flat is perfect... as long as you're at low volume. As the volume comes up, the bass gets exaggerated, and must be cut in order to maintain a balanced sound. But at this point, the cabinet is also thrown into the mix, and it becomes difficult to distinguish the parts from the whole – especially when the PJB cabinet design is taken into consideration.

One really nice feature of the preamp is the input level control, which is accompanied by an active/passive switch (piezo pickups only work with the switch set to passive). The input level control lets you adjust the strength of the pickup signal that gets sent to the EQ, and then to the power section, and includes a clip light to let you know when the signal is getting too hot. The input level control is useful for adjusting the weight or presence of the sound: decrease it and the sound becomes more ambient and old school; increase it, and it becomes a bit more aggressive and modern. Simply put, I wish every double bass amp had an input stage like this.

EQ Stage and Limiter

The EQ section of both amps consists of five fixed bands: Lo-Bass (50Hz), Hi-Bass (160Hz), Lo-Mid (630Hz), Hi-Mid (2.5kHz), and Treble (12kHz), each adjustable by +/- 18dB. The EQ band settings are usefully chosen and very musical, with plenty of room to tweak the sound to your taste. My one complaint about this

section, which is pretty much my only real complaint about the whole amp, is the absence of a variable hi-pass filter (the amp has a built-in HP filter at 40Hz). As the volume increases, the bass starts to override all other frequencies pretty quickly, and while it can be easily dialed back using the two bass controls, a lot of "good" frequencies also get rolled back in the process. I ended up solving this problem by inserting a variable HP filter in the effects loop. But it would have been nice to have this feature included in the amp design; with it, I would be forced to call the Super Flightcase the ultimate "plug & play" DB amp. As it is, it's still excellent.

The built-in limiter had me rolling my eyes at first at some of the reviews that proclaimed that it was "completely transparent" with a compression ratio of 3:1. Once I used it, however, I had to admit that it's a really useful feature that is designed to help safeguard the amp and speakers. Even set full on, it is very musical, and at high volumes it's nice to know that the amp is protecting itself from too much overloading of certain frequencies. I used it when the volume was high, and turned it off during low-volume situations. The best thing I can say about the limiter is that I usually loathe compressors for double bass, and I actually like this one.

Other Features and Output

The Flightcase amps both include the following features: effects send/return, headphone out, XLR DI with ground lift (which works perfectly, according to one FOH soundman who ran sound at a high profile gig I used it on), tuner out, and line out. There is a voltage selector switch to go between 110-120 and 220-240 volts AC on the Super Flightcase, but the Flightcase does not have such a switch, as it works on any AC voltage from 90 to 250 volts.

There's not much to be said about the power amp from a non-technical point of view other than to note that it sounds very clean even at high volumes. The way all of the parts feed into the power section (input level/limiter) seem very well thought out and executed. The regular Flightcase BG-150 seems a bit underpowered for some of the situations and venues I play, but it's difficult to tell whether this is due to the power amp or to the fact that the BG-150 has two fewer drivers than the Super Flightcase BG-300. After playing many gigs with the Super Flightcase, I have yet to run into the situation that it couldn't handle, and that's saying a lot.

Cabinet Design and Speakers

Double bassists who amplify are often working against a terrible double whammy: in addition to being in the worst place to hear what the bass actually sounds like (behind the bass), we often find ourselves playing with an amp on the floor supplying reinforcement of the bass sound to everyone but us (unless we have ears on our ankles). With the two upward firing drivers on each model, the design of the Flightcase amps is a godsend for double bassists. The two up-firing drivers have a dual role, in that they provide a more ambient sound spread, and also act as a personal monitor for the bassist without taking his or her head off in the process. If you're not hearing enough bass in the mix, move closer to the amp. If you're hearing too much, move slightly away. I have never been as pleased with any speaker configuration as I have been with the array of small drivers in the Flightcase combos, which seem designed with the frustrated double bassist in mind. In addition to being small, the neodymium drivers are also very light, which makes either combo easy to carry.

The cabinet design as it relates to the sound is very counterintuitive at first. You'd expect a cabinet with nothing but 5" drivers to sound too bright and thin, right? In actual practice, nothing could be further from the truth. The sound, while coming across as very natural, even, and ambient, is thick and warm in a very good way. Not being a techie, I can only guess as to the reason, but to me several things jump out about the cabinet design. First, it's a very deep cabinet, which goes along with my experience with thick sounding cabinet configurations. While I don't usually like the "thick" sound, I think that what makes it work for me here is that the small drivers speak very quickly and let the cabinet design create the lows, as opposed to having a large cabinet resonating with the sound from a 12" or 15" driver. Second, the depth of the cabinet is used to house three long tubular bass ports at the bottom of the array, and these seem to be the key to the thickness of the sound (the sound coming off the up-firing drivers doesn't seem nearly as weighty by comparison).

The manual also provides an in-depth acoustic analysis of how cabinet placement affects the resulting sound, which I have found to be pretty much spot-on in actual practice. The one place the amp had a little difficulty cutting through was when it was used in the middle of a very large stage, with no walls within 20 feet. After a little tweaking, I was able to find the range, but the combo is very sensitive to placement, and requires a bit of a learning curve for regular use in this respect.

The Proof is in the Pudding: Clips of the Super Flightcase BG-300 in Action

To me, all of the above is just theoretical blather if I can't actually hear the amp in action. I'll include links to three soundclips here from a couple of separate nights of a steady gig at the Nachbar – a musical setting which runs the gamut from straight ahead to completely insane. The venue and ensemble was chosen as fodder for the clips because the band can get pretty loud, the room is often difficult to dial in sound-wise from night to night, and as a chord-less trio, it's easy to hear the tone of the amplified bass. All clips were recorded live to an Edirol R-09 sitting on a music stand in front of the ensemble.

What Is This Thing:
chrisfitzgeraldmusic.com/mp3/What%20Is%20This%20Thing.mp3
You Are Too Beautiful:
chrisfitzgeraldmusic.com/mp3/YouAreTooBeautiful.mp3
I'm Confessin':
chrisfitzgeraldmusic.com/mp3/I%27mConfessin%27.mp3

Conclusion

Both combos are excellent, with the absence of an adjustable HP filter being my only complaint. I give both a hearty two thumbs up, with the caveat that if you are worried about headroom, the Super Flightcase BG-300 would be a wiser choice. See www.philjonespuresound.com for more information and specifications.