

# KEEPER OF THE FLAME

## Kustom Defender tube amplifier

BY PHILIPPE HERNDON

**M**ORE THAN 40 YEARS AGO, Kustom arrived on the amplifier scene with solid-state designs covered in sparkly automotive upholstery. The stage-worthy combination of reliable technology and eye-catching Tuck-N-Roll Naugahyde covering distinguished the brand and attracted a devoted following of enthusiasts and players. While most of the company's competitors have expanded their product lines to include solid-state designs over the past four decades, Kustom has mirrored this historic trend by adding some newer tube-driven models. Joining their Coupe Series of all-tube combos and heads is the manufacturer's latest offering, the 50-watt Defender amplifier.

### FEATURES

WHILE IT FEATURES no sparkly, cushy Naugahyde cover to poke at or sit on, the Defender has plenty of good looks and quality construction. The amp and speaker are housed in a solid pine cabinet that enriches the tone while it reduces weight. I was pleased to find the all-tube, reverb-tank-equipped Defender weighing in at a solid but not unbearable 38 pounds. The detailing is well done; the raised stitching on the classic black Tolex recalls the classic

motorcycle style, while the silver piping provides definition and projects class.

All the front controls are mounted on a glossy blackface panel with chrome knobs and a blue jewel power indicator. Although extremely stylish, I found the gear-shaped knobs lacking a distinctive pointer, which compromised my ability to assess my settings from a distance. On the back of the amp are extra speaker outputs, a corresponding impedance selector and an input for a footswitch to control an adjustable volume boost. While no footswitch was included, the Defender accepts common latched footswitches for keyboards, and Kustom also offers a switch that works with standard guitar cables. Within the thoughtful and protective tube cage resides three 12AX7 preamp tubes, two EL34 output tubes, and a bias switch that allows the amp to be converted from the EL34s to 6L6s.

While the amp looks like a basic master volume tube amp from the layout, there are some really nice circuit design surprises. Kustom's proprietary Duo-Mod circuit changes how gain is allocated through the preamp and allows a gradual range of gain levels from the volume and master controls. The master is also tied to the tone controls, allowing a player to adjust between clean and overdriven sounds easily



KUSTOM DEFENDER TUBE AMPLIFIER

**LIST PRICE:** \$749.00  
**MANUFACTURER:** Kustom Amplification, [kustom.com](http://kustom.com)  
**POWER OUTPUT:** 50 watts  
**CHANNELS:** One  
**INPUTS:** One  
**FEATURES:** All-pine cabinet with birch baffle, Duo-Mod pre-amp circuitry, spring reverb, footswitchable power amp boost  
**CONTROLS:** Volume, master volumes, master volume bypass, bass, middle, treble, presence, bright switch for Classic American or British Tones  
**TUBE COMPLEMENT:** Three 12AX7 preamp, two EL34 output  
**SPEAKER:** Custom Eminence 12-speaker, 16-ohm

without having to dramatically adjust the equalization to compensate. A master-bypass switch is also provided for players who prefer the headroom and grit of non-master volume amplifiers.

### PERFORMANCE

RUN CLEAN, THE DEFENDER was versatile and pleasant sounding at almost all settings. With a Stratocaster, I turned the master and bright switches off, set the EQ controls in the vicinity of 12 o'clock and added a touch of presence. The amp sounded quite nice at this basic setting, with abundant warmth for neck pickup playing and available sparkle for the Strat's notched positions. I was surprised at the amount of clean headroom available from the EL34s, which traditionally shine more in crunchier settings and break up faster than 6L6s. Of the EQ controls, the treble control seemed to have the most dramatic effect on the Defender's voice. I found the amp extremely responsive to pick attack and dynamics, while the full-sized reverb tank bloomed nicely.

While it probably doesn't have enough gain to satisfy the hair metal crowd, the Defender boasts overdrive capabilities that will undoubtedly thrill vintage enthusiasts who long for a portable version of Pete Townshend's *Live at Leeds* tone. Activating the master volume allowed me to create a strong range of diverse tones using the two volume controls, and the Duo-Mod circuit performed as advertised, advancing from crystalline clean through to gritty fuzz. It seemed as if I never touched the EQ, achieving nearly all the tones I needed through judicious adjustment of the volume and master controls. The Defender seemed to intuit where I was going, and gradually provided more distortion without any additional high-end harshness. The footswitchable boost delivered an additional 10db for lead parts and fills. The only hard part of using this amp was remembering to turn the boost off.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

WITH CLASSIC GOOD LOOKS and a creative approach to overdriven tones, the Kustom Defender offers some new twists to a market crowded with vintage "reissues". If you're looking for a versatile, portable, and classic sounding tube combo, it's an amp well worth checking out. ●

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PRO	CON
GREAT TONES AND LOOKS; USEFUL BOOST; REASONABLE WEIGHT	CONTROL KNOBS MAKE SETTINGS DIFFICULT TO READ

