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Not to be confused with UK amp makers Custom Sound, the Kustom name dates back to the late '60s, when this US company were best known for a range of solid-state amplification covered in colourful, car upholstery-style padded vinyl called 'tuck & roll'. Designs became more conventional in the '70s and the brand changed hands several times. It disappeared during the next decade, before resurfacing on products aimed at the shallow-pocket sector. The current Kustom range now caters for all price points via various valve- or chip-equipped lines that originate from America and China. The latter country is the source of a recent addition to the solid-state side, the Double Barrel combo, which crams quite a lot into an impressively proportioned twin 12-inch package that's very competitively priced.

Construction

In keeping with this meagre money status, styling is along the lines of that already employed by the company's cost-conscious Rehearsal and Stage series of combos. This means a somewhat staid, square-cut image, although a generous edge radius all round helps to soften the lines a little.

Kustom Double Barrel

Guitar
combo
amplifier

The recently introduced Double Barrel combo from Kustom is big in terms of features and size, but price is certainly on the small side.

The twin-speaker format presumably inspires the Double Barrel designation and also dictates the rectangular dimensions. These are definitely more sizeable than the selling price suggests and combine to create a low-level look.

The cab is nicely constructed, although whether it's made of MDF or particle board is hard to determine, as any internal evidence is well hidden beneath a matte-black paint job. It wouldn't be fair to expect anything too deluxe for this sort of dosh, but the end result certainly seems suitably sturdy, while the 16kg weight is easily hefted via a single, centrally sited strap handle. The enclosure is adorned in a lightly textured black vinyl, which has been neatly applied, apart from a couple of unglued ends on the cutaway for the control panel. All eight

Performing Musician

Kustom Double Barrel
£149

Its price may be modest, but this new combo from Kustom can boast performance abilities that certainly exceed expectations. Styling plays it safe, but sound quality is very exciting and makes the Double Barrel a real winner, guaranteed to please any player who wants a lot for comparatively few pounds.

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corners are equipped with chunky black plastic protectors, while four meaty feet safeguard the base.

A square-cornered speaker grille occupies much of the front and is edged with white piping that contrasts the reasonably rigid black basket-weave material. The slim panel above boasts an old-style Kustom logo, which adds a vintage touch, while the speaker section sports a small Double Barrel badge in the lower left corner. The baffle is upright, rather than angled, and supports two parallel-mounted, Double Barrel-labelled, 12-inch speakers, which are also Chinese-made and apparently designed by Eminence for Kustom. Their comparatively small magnets indicate low-budget ambitions, but this is in keeping with the pared-down price.

Controls and connections

The generous width of this combo supplies plenty of space for the top-mounted and forward-facing control panel. As usual, this exposed position puts the knobs at risk to potential damage, but in reality this combo isn't intended to undergo careless use. The prominent white position pointers on the black fascia hark back to Kustom's past, although the bright and shiny chromed knobs aren't as authentic. They look suitably old-style, but unfortunately the small reference dot on the top of each is very hard to spot under any lighting conditions, so seeing control settings can be quite tricky.

A single input is accompanied by a seven-strong control complement. The first two knobs comprise the Lead channel, governing gain and volume, with the former affecting the amount of available distortion, from subtle break-up to flat-out filth. The clean side is controlled by a solitary Volume pot, while a small push switch selects either option. The passive EQ is common to both, with Low, Mid and High making up the usual tonal trio.

The final control concerns another surprise at this price: an effects section.

Admittedly, the choice is somewhat limited, all being preset, single-speed and strictly analogue, but at this sort of money anything can be considered a bonus. A push switch provides the option of delay or reverb, while a second engages chorus. The pot provides a variable amount of any of these effects, blending it with the original signal. The lack of any optional footswitching facilities for these effects or channel choice is another cost-related factor. While this isn't a real drawback in a domestic situation, it could create problems for live work, especially as the Double Barrel is being touted as a giggle combo.

The top panel is completed by Kustom's typically bright blue power indicator light, plus an attendant On/Off switch. Additional connections are to be found on the underside of the chassis — an inconvenient, but not uncommon location these days, presumably chosen for cost-cutting reasons. However, this isn't exactly the most practical place, as plugging in accordingly entails indulging in that popular party game,

'Hunt The Socket.' Either that or suffering a rush of blood to the head, brought on by prolonged peering upside down when in search of the appropriate aperture! This hidden-away array consists of a stereo input for CD/tape player use; headphones out, also via a stereo jack; plus mono line and speaker outputs. The former is intended to feed an external amp or mixer, while the latter links to an external enclosure, muting the internal speaker in the process.

A label on the back panel helpfully indicates the order of this little lot, although the layout doesn't extend to including the position of the mains power input, which is also sited down below decks. Nor do Kustom choose to show the site of this all-important component in the otherwise helpful owner's manual. I realise it's not really too hard to find, but only if you know where to look, and it should be remembered that this amp is aimed at the entry-level end, which tends to be less well informed about such matters. All assistance is therefore that much more welcome, especially on the subject of 'secret' sockets and knowing precisely where to poke yer plug!

Performance

Powering up the Double Barrel is a pleasantly silent process and there's a commendable lack of background noise, apart from a small pop when switching channels. Significant hiss is also apparent when the Lead Gain and Volume controls are at full stretch, but this is to be expected.

Selecting the clean side reveals a reasonable amount of undistorted output. The EQ proves to be quite effective, employing well-chosen frequency ranges that enable all three tone controls to colour the sound to taste where it matters most. Low adds a useful amount of bass boost, while High brightens the upper end without becoming harsh. Mid is more subtle, but sweeps from gently scooped to a cutting bark that avoids being too honky and nasal. The EQ trio works well with the natural aural weight and spread of twin 12s, supplying a very solid sound that suits either single coils or humbucker pickups and belying the Double Barrel's low price. Cranking up the clean volume also produces a pleasant surprise, as delivery doesn't deteriorate into the fizz that might be expected from such an inexpensive amp. Instead, the end results of the all-out setting are endowed with a raunchy and resonant aggression that's gritty, but still well defined and dynamic.

The Lead channel proves to be equally able, thanks to usefully flexible distortion that effectively carries on where the Clean range finishes. This means that minimum gain provides bluesy break-up, while higher settings dial in increasing amounts of dirt. Balancing this with the Volume pot permits copious quantities of well-controlled filth, but naturally things tend to become increasingly blurred. Maximum positions produce sonic bedlam that makes the Double Barrel seem louder than its 30 Watts. The speakers may be inexpensive, but they prove well

Tech Spec

Double Barrel

- 30W RMS (into 8Ω) output.
- 2 x 12-inch speakers.
- Lead channel Gain and Volume controls.
- Clean channel Volume control.
- Low, Mid and High EQ controls.
- Effect Level control, Channel selector switch, Delay/Reverb selector switch, Chorus on/off switch.
- External speaker, Line and Headphone outputs.
- CD/Tape input.
- Dimensions (WDH): 665 x 255 x 440mm.
- Weight: 16kg.

chosen, handling all the amp can dish out with no complaints, while being equally up to the task in tonal terms.

The shared EQ section dictates that a degree of compromise is necessary when selecting the best tone settings for clean or dirty use, but this can be achieved, helped by some pre-voicing that's apparent when switching between both channels.

The onboard effects are adequate rather than outstanding. Delay delivers a medium-length repeat; small room-style reverb is approximated via flutter echo and feedback, while chorus keeps things controlled and musical. Even at maximum level none of the effects is overly intrusive, however reverb is the least impressive and soon acquires an unpleasant honky resonance. Turning the effects off is possible only via the Level pot. This single control system also means that chorus can't be selected without either delay or reverb. Kustom claim this combination enhances the effect, although in reality each sounds best using different level settings.

Conclusion

The Double Barrel is bigger than most combos at this price, and the twin 12-inch speakers are equally unusual for the money. This sort of loot doesn't usually buy such high-level performance either, courtesy of useful EQ, excellent clean sounds and versatile overdriven abilities. The effects section is a nice general-purpose extra that saves on startup costs, but the presets are limited, as is operation, and most players will probably prefer proper pedal power.

The only real criticism concerns the lack of footswitching, particularly because this combo will otherwise cope well on stage. Overall output might struggle against an animal drummer and a bigger backline, but it's certainly more than suited for the lower-volume work that's increasingly common in these Health & Safety-obsessed, noise meter-ridden times.

The looks of Kustom's new combo may not spring too many surprises, but the sounds certainly do, impressively exceeding their supposed entry-level status and accordingly ensuring excellent value for money. ■ PM