

# MOVING ON UP

WITH MEMORIES OF A TINY LOW END TOO PAINFUL TO RECOUNT, **PHIL DOBSON** TAPS INTO ASHDOWN'S ANSWER TO EXPANDING YOUR BOTTOM ON A BUDGET. GO BIG, GO LOUD, GO PROUD WITH THE ELECTRIC BLUE 180...

## GBINFO

### ASHDOWN ELECTRIC BLUE 180

PRICE: £205 (head only)

BUILT IN: UK

TYPE: Solid state head

POWER OUTPUT: 180 Watts

RMS @ 4 ohms

FEATURES: High and low

inputs, five-band EQ,

deep, bright and EQ defeat

switches, sub-harmonic

generator, series effects

loop, tuner/line out,

KLR DI output

DIMENSIONS: 134(l) x

474(w) x 315(d) mm

WEIGHT: 7.5 kg

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... The spotty complexion is a faded memory, while the cheap copy from the Groans Of Christmas Past has now been upgraded to a Jap or Mex P- or J-bass reissue. So, all is well in young bass player land? Er, well, not quite...

Young minds are overflowing with desires to be in bands like The Darkness, The Libertines, Franz Ferdinand, even Led Zeppelin, and of course those inexorable Chili Peppers. Alas, these desires are not best served by a bass rig that sounds like the morning after an over-spiced kebab. No siree – the starter-pack combo with its 20-watt speaker will just have to go.

You now need a proper bass set-up; something that can flap your flares and really upset the rest of the household. In days gone by the options would have been extremely limited, but thankfully these days you can even get into flashy, high-end brand names for what is frankly silly money. So, join us as we climb into our trusty UK

reviewing pants and cruise down the Essex delta via the little hamlet of Ashdown-cum-Colchester.

## PRE & POWER AMP

For we mouldy-olies in the 30 to 50 age-group, the mere words 'electric blue' cause a snigger or two. Imagine a late-night made-for-TV film. A young blonde woman in a swimsuit answers a poolside phone, then a young Puerto-Rican man in blue dungarees turns up for 'maintenance'. Get the gist?

So, is the curiously named Ashdown Electric Blue 180 as suggestive, but also harmless as those memories of my own college days? Well, it's certainly blue, and like the blonde in the swimsuit, it's initially very pleasing on the eye. So far, so good? But innocent and inoffensive? Reading the spec, this amp gives off the vibe that it could easily be man enough to accompany 19 minutes of stunning 'visually enhanced' chakka-wah funky guitar. But enough of the innuendo, time to get down to, er, business.

The case is covered in a tough black carpeting with sturdy plastic corners. Overall, it has a professional look about it that surpasses the somewhat school-room look of some of the cheaper gear offered by others in previous years.

Following the previous budget Electric Blue 130 and 150, the new 180 version is essentially a scaled-down version of larger amps in the product range. Ashdown boss Mark Gooday confirms that the 180 design is derived from the 2003-launched MAG300.

To make it more affordable, some of the headroom and luxuries of the seriously semi-pro leaning amps have been omitted or trimmed down, but the foundation for a professional approach on a lean budget is still the overall intention.

The ABM/MAG trademark Ashdown front-panel VU meter is absent here, replaced with an array of LEDs laid out in the arc of a meter movement; three green, followed by one yellow, then one red. It's neither as graceful nor precise as a VU meter needle, but

## ENDORSEES

## TOP NAMES PLAY ASHDOWN

Although still a relatively new company, you'll find plenty of pro bassists using Ashdown rigs.

There's Adam Clayton of U2, Colin Greenwood of Radiohead and Mark King for starters, plus all

manner of bassists for artists as diverse as Beyonce, Gareth Gates and Lenny Kravitz. Most of the pro guys use the pro series gear – see [www.ashdownmusic.co.uk](http://www.ashdownmusic.co.uk) for full artist details.

it's plenty adequate for a visual guide to your input level.

The standard Ashdown five-band EQ layout has bass, middle and treble rotary pots giving +/-15dB adjustment at 100Hz, 660Hz and 7kHz shelving, supplemented by two additional

**"THE OVERALL PEDIGREE OF THE EB180 IS VERY MUCH IN ASHDOWN MAG TERRITORY"**

intermediate pots giving similar cut and boost at 220Hz and 1.6kHz. The rotary pots offer a retro feel to the amp, though are still highly effective at shaping a decent tone. Once you've arrived at ballpark settings for the main



Kind of retro, kind of acronautical. The Ashdown brand is undoubtedly cool

bass, middle and treble profiles, it's the intermediates on this amp that offer the best fine-trim shaping.

The push-in 'deep' and 'bright' boost buttons offer instant extra rumble and sparkle as required, with an extra 8dB at 50Hz and 10dB at 10kHz, and the ever-impressive Ashdown sub-harmonic generator is included as part of the standard layout of this amp. As this is effectively the same circuit as fitted to the higher spec MAG and ABM series, it's a real bonus to get it at this price.

Finished off with the same optional patches and outputs as per the MAG series (send/return jacks for a series effects loop, a balanced DI output and tuner/line-output jack), this is a very impressive front panel for the money. By contrast, the rear panel layout couldn't be simpler – IEC mains connector and on/off rocker switch, cooling fan grille and two 1/4-inch jack speaker outputs.

Dig deeper into the spec and it's evident that for understandable cost control reasons, a few less capacitors in the tone circuits have resulted in narrower bandwidth response and a couple less MOSFETs in the power stage have reduced the overall power capability. However, the overall pedigree of the Electric Blue 180 is very much in Ashdown MAG territory and although it is a reduced version of its larger MAG siblings, the output capability is still a very impressive 180-watts RMS into a four-ohm speaker load.

## SOUNDS

We tested the Electric Blue 180 with two different cabs; a 4x10 Ashdown 410T with a horn, and a hybrid 1x15 + 2x8 cab, and overall, the results were very impressive. With sensible use of the MAG-based preamp/EQ stage and sparing use of the sub-harmonic generator to flesh out the sound, this amp certainly delivers some seriously solid sounds, especially for general rock



No nonsense around the back. Speaker and mains outs and that's it

and indie genres. As with the larger MAG amps, once you've found your basic bass/middle/treble profile, the subtlety and variance from the intermediate frequencies enables you to dial in plenty of different mid-frequency voices to suit a wide variety of musical styles.

In fact, it's the middle-frequency tones that are strongest in the EB180, which makes a welcome change from the often boom-and-tizz type slap-happy sounds of a certain Green Amp throughout the 1980s and 90s (with which Mark Gooday was also heavily involved). Great though Trace Elliot amps are/were, there are nonetheless plenty of bass players who want something with more lower-mid grind and punch. For those – yes, that means all you modern rockers – the



## DETAILS

PROVIDING PLENTY OF HEADROOM FOR THOSE SMALLER GIGS, THE EB180'S SOUND HAS PLENTY OF ROCK POTENTIAL



■ The series of LEDs gives you a visual guide to setting your input level: red is clip



■ Essential for good quality link up to a PA, engineers will love your on board DI out



■ Only a five-band EQ, but its very powerful for the majority of rock, pop, funk and jazz



## GBOPINION

### ASHDOWN ELECTRIC BLUE 180

#### GOLD STARS

- ★ Wide ranging, though sensible features
- ★ Good sounds
- ★ Excellent value for money

#### BLACK MARKS

- Nothing at this price

#### IDEAL FOR...

The next move up from your practice combo

Ashdown sound will really appeal.

The lack of tubes anywhere in the EB and its inability to biamp means that the really thundering stuff of its bigger brothers is beyond reach, but let's keep that price in mind.

Speaker selection is evidently important to get the best out of any amp, but doing this on a tight budget can be a bit of a balancing act. The tendency for tradition would tend to lean towards a 1x15 format, but to find one with an integral crossover and HF horn or smaller speaker at low cost. Bearing in mind that the bandwidth



with a good 2x10 cabinet. If your finances and biceps will allow, the ideal for single-cab format would probably be a 4x10 with an integral horn, but that may have to be a future option.

This amp offers a high-quality sound for the money, with ample headroom for smaller gigs and enough confidence to overcome the macho leanings of virtually any drummer or guitar hero in the rehearsal room.

## GBRATINGS

### ASHDOWN ELECTRIC BLUE 180

BUILD QUALITY	4.5/5
FEATURES	4.5/5
SOUNDS	4.5/5
VALUE FOR MONEY	4.5/5
GBVERDICT	4.5/5

"FOR ALL OF YOU MODERN ROCKERS, THE SOUND HERE WILL REALLY APPEAL"

and EQ capabilities of lower- and middle-cost amps such as the Electric Blue tend not to offer as much manipulation of the higher frequencies as their more expensive stablemates, on balance, it might be wiser to initially mate the Electric Blue amp

## GBCONCLUSION

DERIVED FROM LAST YEAR'S MAG300, THE EB180 OFFERS FANTASTIC VALUE FOR MONEY

■ Mark Gooday's intention with Ashdown has always been to meet the demands of a bass market that, by the mid/late 1990s, was frankly getting a bit fed-up with 12-band EQ, over-compressed signals and simulated stadium sounds, unnecessarily shiny speakers and unwanted switches/gizmos.

Our bandmates lost their love of the Strat and the valve for a few years, but managed to rekindle it again. In recent years, most of us engine-room attendants have similarly rediscovered our love of a good J- or P-bass sound, and frankly we're chuffed. If it was good enough for the basis of that classic James Jamerson and Carol Kaye sound, then it's certainly good enough for us mere mortals. All we had to do was to learn how to use this knowledge and absolute truth in an intelligent way. It's the same with amps.

From stage rigs down to student-combos, what the bass market has always needed is an amp range that sounds good with a good basic instrument, is simple to use and is affordable. Thankfully, Ashdown (and to be fair, Peavey) has long-since realised that. Paraphrasing from the late, great prophet Jaco of Pastori (Book of Harmonic, verses 3 to 5), "Tis time to put away childish things. Buy ye not computer games with money from thy part-time job. Go forth and use thy dosh to get thyself a decent bass rig." Just like this one, eh? **GB**