



Core Value

Blackstar introduces a timely update to its award-winning programmable guitar amp range, but how do these combos sound?

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BLACKSTAR ID:CORE V4 STEREO 10, STEREO 20 & STEREO 40 COMBOS £139, £179 & £215

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What You Need To Know

- 1 What have we got here, then?**
The ID:Core V4 combos are the latest versions of Blackstar's award-winning programmable digital amp range, featuring the latest connectivity and a new low-power option.
- 2 Do they actually sound any good?**
They sound really good, with six programmable amp voices combined with improved delay, modulation and reverb effects, which can all be saved in six patches. The effects are all stereo and use a clever wide-field signal process to make the amp sound much bigger than it actually is.
- 3 Who's gonna play one of these?**
While the compact dimensions are ideal for home users, all three combos are a good fit for pro and semi-pro players looking for a small programmable amp that's ready to go in seconds. The stereo headphones/CabRig Light output can be hooked up to a console, while the updated USB-C connector offers four-channel direct recording to your computer.

Chaucer's famous quote 'time and tide wait for no man' could easily be expanded to include technology in today's fast-moving and constantly changing world. In the relatively small but significant market of guitar amplification, digital signal processing has made it possible to condense hardware analogue effects and amplifier voices into software, which can either be used in a computer as a standalone plug-in or loaded into a convenient digital amplifier platform. Digital signal processors continue to get faster and more powerful, while becoming increasingly affordable, making it possible to buy an all-in-one programmable amp for a fraction of what it might have cost four decades ago.

At the top end of the market, this translates into vast multi-core DSPs producing guitar tones that can go straight onto multi-platinum album tracks, providing professional artists with night-after-night reliability and consistency for touring, when you need to precisely reproduce specific tones and effects. Meanwhile, at the equally important entry level, users benefit from greatly improved tones and features that would have been out of reach just a few years ago.

It can't be easy for manufacturers to keep up with the ever-changing digital market,

but one amp builder who has always stayed ahead of the curve is Blackstar, with a relentless R&D program that seems to result in more yearly product debuts than most of the competition. As if to underline that point, the Northampton-based company has just released the fourth version of its ID:Core programmable combo range, with small but significant tweaks that help to keep the ID:Core amps current in an increasingly competitive market. Time,

The V4 combos are ideal first amps, and the sound quality means they're suited to all levels of players

then, to take a fresh look at the new ID:Core V4 Stereo 10, 20 and 40 combos and ask if improvements in digital guitar tone make these new amps more relevant for experienced pro and semi-pro players.

At first glance, all three combos look very similar to their V3 equivalents, with smart vinyl-covered particle board cabinets and a check-patterned grille cloth. As the name points out, each amp is stereo and uses a pair of special-design loudspeakers: three-inch



1. The ID:Core Stereo amps all have the same six voices, a choice of two cleans, two crunches and two overdrives for a wide spectrum of tones that covers practically every musical genre

2. All three combos have been updated to the current USB-C connector for improved data transfer and compatibility – the direct recording feature in particular benefits from this. Each combo also now sports this low-power option, dropping the full output down to just one watt for quiet practice sessions

for the Stereo 10, five-inch for the Stereo 20, and 6.5-inch for the Stereo 40.

The control panel has a new brushed black aluminium finish that adds a touch of class. The mini USB 2.0 B socket has been updated to the current USB 3.0 C style, and there's a new power reduction button that drops the amp's full rated output to just one watt. Otherwise, the front-panel controls are pretty much identical. A single input jack feeds the six-way amp voice selector, offering a choice of Clean Warm, Clean Bright, Crunch, Super Crunch, OD1 and OD2, followed by rotary controls for Gain, Volume and EQ, which uses Blackstar's patented ISF control to blend UK and USA EQ circuits to taste.

Effects are handled by three button switches for delay, modulation and reverb, with a choice of four effects in each type governed by a split segment rotary selector that modifies one parameter, while a separate level control modifies another. A tap tempo button can be used to set delay times on the fly. There's an integral tuner, accessed by holding down the reverb button switch for a second.

Other connectivity includes sockets for line in and streaming using a TRRS jack and headphones/CabRig out with four-channel direct recording using USB. The two larger amps get a footswitch jack,





3. The ID:Core amps feature 12 different effects, split into three groups of four for delays, modulations and reverbs. Two parameters can be edited from the front panel, while there's more scope for editing from within Blackstar's Architect partner app

4. Invented and patented by Blackstar co-founder the late Bruce Keir, ISF stands for Infinite Shape Feature, which allows the EQ circuit to continuously morph between classic British and American EQ networks. It was originally designed to help speed up testing on a custom amp prototype by allowing the ideal filter crossover points to be discovered in real-time

In a studio setting, the CabRig Lite speaker-emulated output provides instantly great ready-to-record tones

in line with their increased performance capability. Power for all three of these amps comes via a 16-volt DC mains adaptor, which plugs into the rear of the cabinet, also home to a useful recessed handgrip for carrying. There's also an optional battery pack that gives around nine hours of unplugged playtime.

In Use & Sounds

The ID:Core's sounds have benefitted from software and hardware upgrades, improving the sound of the amp voices and effects, and in the Stereo 40 increasing the volume level a little as well. The six voices cover the entire spectrum from pristine cleans to OTT metal lead, and thanks to the deceptively simple ISF EQ control, they need minimal time to dial in. We used a couple of vintage and modern Strats alongside a PAF-equipped Les Paul, and for each guitar the experience is very much plug in and play, with instant gratification from the ID:Core's effects. The widescreen stereo effect seems more noticeable than before, with delays, modulations and reverbs combining to give the illusion that you're playing through a much larger rig.

The Clean Warm sound is ideal for jazz, while the Clean Bright voice has a more contemporary vibe and can be pushed into a mild overdrive with the gain level turned right up. This one sounds great

with single coils and a dash of chorus and reverb. The two crunch sounds are ideal for chord riffing and blues-rock soloing – we had great fun using the higher gain Super Crunch voice with our Les Paul. Meanwhile, the traditional Blackstar OD1 and OD2 lead sounds will cover any need, from 80s master volume-type overdrive to modern metal chug-chug detuned riffing, although the small speakers mean bass response is somewhat limited. The slightly increased power of the Stereo 40 makes it more useful as a band practice tool, as well as making it suitable for smaller, quieter live performances.

You can hook the amp up to a console from the headphones lead and make full use of the CabRig Lite speaker emulation, although this disconnects the amp's internal speakers, so you'd need some kind of external monitoring.

Saving and storing patches is very easy: just press and hold the Manual button switch for two seconds. You can save one patch in each of the ID:Core's six voice switch settings, the only limitation being that the amp voice has to match the voice switch location, so you can't store a Super Crunch-based patch in the Clean Warm slot, for example. However, with Blackstar's Architect software hooked up via USB, you can save and recall any number of patches, as well as control the amp in real-time.



Verdict

On the face of it, the new improved ID:Core V4 amps aren't much different from the V3 versions, although the sounds are incrementally better, while the important change to USB-C keeps them compatible with modern mobile devices. The one-watt output power switch is useful for neighbour-friendly late-night entertainment, and the slight increase in output from the V40 adds to its versatility.

In a studio setting, the excellent CabRig Lite speaker-emulated output provides instantly great ready-to-record tones into your computer or console, making plug-ins unnecessary and saving your processing power for other things, with the ability to control all the effects and amp voices in real-time using the free Architect app. For pro and semi-pro players, this makes the ID:Core a powerful writing and recording tool, with the clever Randomiser feature producing unexpected amp and effects combinations when inspiration is needed.

The most inspiring feature of all, though, has to be the price – the Stereo 10 combo retails for just under £140, making it incredible value for money. The ID:Core V4 combos are obviously ideal first amps, loaded with features for hours of fun and inspiration, while the sound quality means they're suited to players at all levels. Definitely worth checking out! **G**



BLACKSTAR STEREO 10 COMBO

PRICE: £139
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Programmable digital guitar amp
OUTPUT: 2x 5W RMS stereo
LOUDSPEAKERS: 2x 3" Blackstar special design
DIMENSIONS: 340(w) x 185 (d) x 265mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.7/8
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: 6x programmable voices
CONTROLS: Voice select, gain, volume, EQ. Effect select, effect level. Button switches for manual mode/patch store, 1W/full power output, effects type select, tap tempo
FOOTSWITCH: None
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Switchable output power from 10W to approx. 1W. CabRig Lite speaker emulation, live streaming, stereo headphones out, deep editing of amp and CabRig settings via free Architect app, integral tuner, 4-channel USB recording
OPTIONS: PB-1 battery bank (£69)
RANGE OPTIONS: Stereo 20 combo (£179), Stereo 40 combo (£215) as reviewed



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BLACKSTAR STEREO 20 COMBO

PRICE: £179
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Programmable digital guitar amp
OUTPUT: 2x 10W RMS stereo
LOUDSPEAKERS: 2x 5" Blackstar special design
DIMENSIONS: 375 (w) x 185 (d) x 292mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 5.2/11.5
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: 6x programmable voices
CONTROLS: Voice select, gain, volume, EQ. Effect select, effect level. Button switches for manual mode/patch store, 1W/full power output, effects type select, tap tempo
FOOTSWITCH: Optional FS11 footswitch can be used to toggle effects and voices, or scroll up and down through patches
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: See Stereo 10 combo
OPTIONS: FS11 footswitch (£49), PB-1 battery bank (£69)
RANGE OPTIONS: As reviewed

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BLACKSTAR STEREO 40 COMBO

PRICE: £215
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Programmable digital guitar amp
OUTPUT: 2x 20W RMS stereo
LOUDSPEAKERS: 2x 6.5" Blackstar special design
DIMENSIONS: 434 (w) x 185 (d) x 336mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 6.2/13.6
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: 6x programmable voices
CONTROLS: Voice select, gain, volume, EQ. Effect select, effect level. Button switches for manual mode/patch store, 1W/full power output, effects type select, tap tempo
FOOTSWITCH: Optional FS11 footswitch can be used to toggle effects and voices, or scroll up and down through patches
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: See Stereo 10 combo
OPTIONS: See Stereo 20 combo
RANGE OPTIONS: As reviewed

8/10

PROS New up-to-date connectivity; slightly better effects and amp voices than V3 amps; the one-watt low power setting is useful for quiet practice; competitive pricing is the main selling point for this trio – they're insanely affordable

CONS After three version updates, there's not much for Blackstar to improve on; we'd like to see more onboard patches with the flexibility of using the same amp voice in more than one onboard patch location; a retaining clip for the DC power cable wouldn't be a bad addition, either