

MERLIN 550



An LED casts an eerie blue glow behind the cooling intake vents.

The GAIN BOOST button provides a mild bass and treble boost (3.5dB). For a punchier sound, the MID BOOST button provides a prominent boost (9.1dB @ 550Hz). Both pre-shape buttons have status-indicating LEDs.

The Merlin 550 features an effect-loop mix control and a built-in, adjustable-frequency bi-amping crossover.

BY TERRY BUDDINGH

Designed and manufactured in Cologne, Germany, the Merlin 550 hybrid head combines the compelling simplicity of Old World tube-preamp technology with the benefits of contemporary low-noise solid-state circuitry. The amp is the result of a collaboration between electronics designer/manufacturer Hardy Kurandt and bass designer/builder Stefan Hess. Kurandt's Musician Sound Design effect pedals and onboard instrument preamps are well known in Europe, and Hess did design work for Bogart Basses.

Understated Elegance

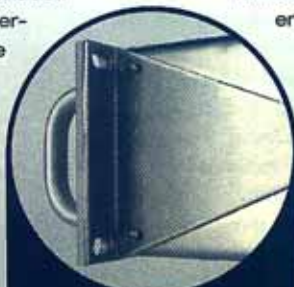
The Merlin 550 is a great example of refined simplicity. Two rounded handles frame its uncluttered aluminum control panel, while three oval vents provide subtle aesthetic contrast.

The Merlin fits a two-space rack perfectly—but who would want to hide its attractive stainless steel chassis? Sure, stainless steel looks cool, but it offers a hidden electrical benefit as well. Ordinary steel transfers the power transformer's magnetic fields throughout the chassis, contributing to increased hum levels. But stainless steel (which is non-magnetic) doesn't transfer magnetic fields the way ordinary steel does, so it reduces hum levels. Many amp designers believe a non-magnetic chassis

also contributes to a more focused and coherent tone.

The Merlin is solidly built, too. Check out those knobs: They're the real deal—chrome-plated solid brass (not plastic). The pre-shape buttons feel solid and dependable, and the rear-panel XLR jacks are metal as well.

A peek inside reveals neat and careful construction—and one of the largest toroidal transformers we've seen. A robust power transformer provides ample, hearty current, which translates into a more solid and slammin' bottom end. A long, finned-aluminum heatsink tunnel hides the Merlin's ten MOSFET output transistors. The variable-speed cooling fan draws air through the front vents and expels it through the rear. The stainless-steel rear panel protects the fan. (On some amps the fragile plastic fan is exposed and vulnerable to damage.) When the amp is idling, the fan is barely audible, even in the quietest environments.



Built tough: The Merlin's stainless-steel chassis has an additional bracket to reinforce its rack ears and aluminum front panel.

Kurandt Technology

Hardy Kurandt incorporated a few unique features in the Merlin's design. While many contemporary bass heads employ some form of mid-scooped pre-shape to enhance slap-style playing, the Merlin has a MID BOOST button intended to add punch when playing fingerstyle. Yes, Hardy also included a slap-voiced pre-shape feature, but it's disguised as the GAIN BOOST button. Instead of cutting the mids,

TECH SPECS

The Merlin's preamp features one Russian-made Sovtek 12AX7WA tube and three passive tone controls (LOW, MID, and HIGH). The tone controls provide attenuation only; frequency response is flat when all three knobs are turned fully clockwise.

The hefty 17½-pound toroidal transformer has an electrostatic shield to reduce hum. A generous complement of ten MOSFET transistors powers its output section. Low-noise MC33079 op amps drive the Merlin's effect loop, balanced line out, and adjustable crossover.

Power rating: 650 watts RMS into 4Ω

Dimensions: 19" x 3³/₈" (two standard rack spaces) x 16" (including handles)

Weight: 37 lbs

Input impedance: 1MΩ

GAIN BOOST pre-shape button:

+3.5dB @ 30Hz; +3.5dB @ 9kHz

MID BOOST pre-shape button:

+9.1dB @ 550Hz

Tone-control frequency centers:

LOW, 30Hz; MID, 550Hz; HIGH, 9kHz

Effect-loop level: 0dB

Adjustable crossover frequency range: 80Hz–800Hz

Made in: Germany

List price: \$2,400

Warranty: One year limited

www.merlin-bass.de

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Soundroom

Merlin *continued*

GAIN BOOST pumps up the bass and treble frequencies slightly. The GAIN BOOST's EQ curve is not as severe as some other manufacturers' slap pre-shape settings.

The Merlin's passive tone-control circuit functions differently than most bass amp EQs—it's "cut-only." Since highs (including noise) don't get boosted, the Merlin stays remarkably hiss-free at all settings.

The Merlin also has an unusual effect-loop circuit. The front-panel mix control blends between parallel and series effect-loop modes. Parallel mode works well when you're adding subtle textural seasoning with time-based effects such as chorus and delay; series mode is better suited for dynamics-sensitive effects such as compressors and envelope

filters. The Merlin's MIX control lets you optimize the loop for the type of effect you're using. Cool.

The Merlin also has a built-in crossover for bi-amping. A rear-panel button routes the low frequencies through the Merlin's internal power amp; a balanced output lets you use another amp to drive the higher frequencies. However, because many affordable power amps available today produce well over 1,000 watts, I can't help thinking that it may have made more sense to route the *high* frequencies through the Merlin's internal power amp, so you could use a larger amp for the power-hungry lows.



The Merlin's rear panel **LINE OUT** and **BI-AMPING** outputs have balanced XLR connectors.

Merlin 550 Head

List price: \$2,400

Score: 1 2 3 4 5

Construction: ●●●●●●

Electronics: ●●●●●●

Ease of Use: ●●●●●●

Sound: ●●●●●●

Value: ●●●●●●

Pros: Musical, well built, and not too heavy.

Cons: Pricy.

Exploring Merlin's Magic

The Merlin's simple tone controls may appear limited, but Hardy Kurandt designed in just enough flexibility to accommodate most playing styles. When paired with an Eden D-410XLT, the Merlin's GAIN BOOST button provided enough mid scoop for clear-toned yet full-bodied J-Bass and Music Man StingRay slap textures. When I played

a Fender Jazz Bass fingerstyle, the MID BOOST button seemed designed specifically to enhance the bridge pickup's punch and power. I was able to get *huge* reggae and salsa tones when I activated the Merlin's crossover and routed the lows through a pair of Wayne Jones 2x10s. There's nothing more effective than a good crossover when you want to get just the deep stuff and eliminate upper-mids and treble.

Since tweaking is one of my basic instincts, I couldn't resist experimenting with different tubes. I preferred a 1960s-era Telefunken 12AX7 for fingerstyle playing; it sounded thicker,

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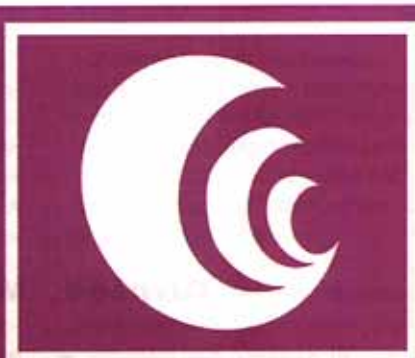


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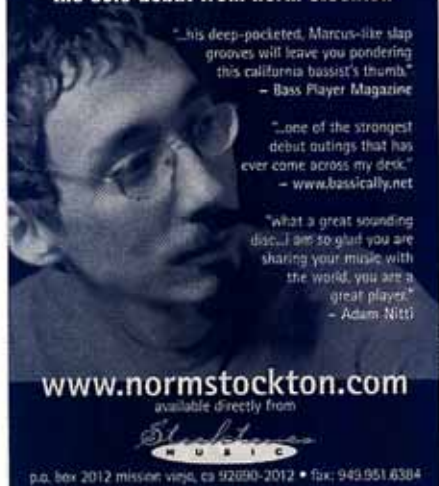
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creamier, and more musical than the original Sovtek 12AX7WA, and it also deepened the bottom end. I preferred a Sylvania 5751 for slap tones: it improved the top-end detail, clarity, and focus, plus it imparted a more sophisticated and articulate character to snappy transients. Moral of the story: You can improve the sound of the Merlin—and most amps, for that matter—by using different tubes. Experiment and see what works best for you, the same way you try different string sets.

Speaking of tubes, the Merlin sounds—and feels—like a well-mannered tube amp. Neither stiff nor sterile, it's one of the most musical transistor-powered amps I've played. I felt that tube-like sense of elasticity, tempered with precise articulation and focused clarity. It has a refined, multi-dimensional texture, and it responds remarkably well to dynamic nuances. The Merlin sounds sweet, but it can also produce a convincing SVT-like throaty growl when assaulted with a pick. I tried the Merlin on several gigs, ranging from a jazz quartet to a loud R&B band, and its silky complexity always shined through.

One staffer took the Merlin to several gigs and to a recording session. The Merlin cranked out smooth, powerful-sounding tones through an Aguilar GS410 and into the house PA, imparting a lush richness to fingerstyle reggae and soul and a crisp zing to loud rock passages. He found the same pleasing results at an outdoor stage, where the Merlin effortlessly handled the extra volume requirements. In the studio the amp was whisper-quiet, and its direct signal went to tape with a pleasant warmth and clarity.

Simple & Effective

No fooling—the Merlin is a great-sounding amp everyone should get a chance to hear. But at \$2,400, it isn't cheap. It's not overflowing with lavish accouterments, but few amps are blessed with so many musical tones. And isn't that what it's all about? **BP**

BP Recommends continued from page 79

Wood output would do well to lend an ear to *Nishoma*. Wood fits Moses' fresh compositions and singular drumming with verve, sensitivity, and velvety tone. (EB)

JOOLS HOLLAND

Big Band Rhythm & Blues [Rhino]

Bassists: David Swift, Ian Jennings (one track)

Instruments: Swift, electric and upright; Jennings, upright

Swift's textbook-perfect R&B lines are an integral part of the big-band karaoke machine that backs up Sting, Steve Winwood, Van Morrison, Eric Clapton, and 17 others as they shuffle and strut through funky blues standards and originals. (EB)

WILLIAM PARKER QUARTET

Raining on the Moon [Thirsty Ear]

Bassist: Parker

Instrument: ¾-size Czech flatback upright

The ever-prolific and powerful Parker adds vocalist Leena Conquest for his second recording on Thirsty Ear's noted avant-garde Blue Series. In a more supportive role than his normal tonal paintings, Parker's forceful odd-time ostinatos offer altoist Rob Brown and drummer Hamid Drake plenty of room to stretch out on the 14-minute soundtrack-like title track. (GO) **BP**