

It's small and the unusual design will certainly turn heads – but is this a real bass amp or a toy? Gareth Morgan gets on the case...

**Guitar**  
BASS

# PJB

## Briefcase Combo

Originally hailing from London, Phil Jones relocated to the USA in 1990 and set up American Acoustic Development (the parent company of PJB), adding the bass amp string to his bow in 2002. Originally a bass player, Jones came up with the idea for the diminutive Briefcase amp based on his 25 years of experience in making speakers and enclosures. With a list of endorsees that already includes Chuck Rainey (Steely Dan), Nathan East (Eric Clapton) and Pino Palladino (The Who and more: see our workshop in *Guitar* Nov 2005), there's a real buzz around Jones' gear. Let's see what all the fuss is about.

This really is the blink-and-you'll-miss-it of bass amps, standing 373mm high, 165mm wide and 405mm deep, it's a neat little oblong, about the size of a PC tower case, that you could quite easily sit on a desk, shelf or in some wasted corner of your practice room. PJB build this little box using 17mm marine-grade plywood, and they've chosen to cover it with mottled black vinyl, which makes scuff protection good and cleaning easy. Eight chrome corners protect the extremities and the unit sits on four super heavy-duty black plastic feet.

Check out the sides of this baby and you'll find a pair of stretched-oval steel vents, impregnated with the neat PJB logo. There's one really cool feature worth noting at this point: in a similar way to the Mesa Boogie's Walkabout Scout unit (reviewed in *Guitar* June 2005), the whole amplifier section is removable. The sides display four Allen-headed fastening bolts, and

careful examination of the upper sections of the front and back faces will pinpoint the remaining relevant fixings; simply grab the set of Allen keys provided and you're away. Sure, it's not as easy as the Boogie's system, but it's certainly possible.

Porting is provided on the rear of the unit via a single black 'drainpipe' and the top is home to one heavy-duty black plastic handle, a more than satisfactory carrying provision as the PJB Briefcase weighs in at a paltry 12.7kg (28lbs).

The face of the Briefcase is dominated by a solid black steel grille, (logo neatly positioned in the middle) and this protects a pair of Phil Jones 5"

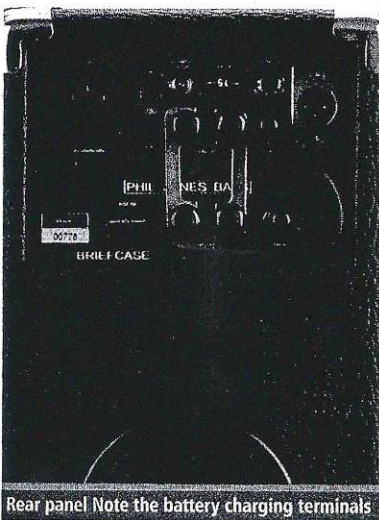
full-range drivers. Jones has been designing his own speakers since 1984, and his use of modern materials like Kevlar for the cones and the highest-grade strontium ferrite magnets adds up to rigid, lightweight, warp-speed responsive full-range units.

Lying in wait above the speaker section, the silver/grey control panel is refreshingly simple. Starting on the left, you get an Active/Passive selector switch followed by a jack input socket with a single knurled chrome (master) Volume control above. The middle of the panel is dedicated to tonal shaping and comprises a five-band graphic

RRP:  
£450



Controls Single volume, a nicely-judged five-band EQ, a compressor, and that's pretty much it



Rear panel Note the battery charging terminals

## The Briefcase could easily sit on a desk, a shelf or some wasted corner of your practice room

equalizer offering 18dB of cut or boost at 50Hz, 160Hz, 630Hz, 2.5kHz and 12kHz via black plastic buttoned sliders. To the right of the EQ section there's another knurled chrome knob for setting the limiter threshold of the internal Compressor/Limiter. Below this sits an headphone jack socket, and to the right there's a pair of switches: the top one turns the Limiter on or off (an adjacent blue LED lights when active) and the bottom one is the unit's power on/off switch with associated green LED.

The back panel is split into two sections, the upper one displaying an AC mains input socket, a Balanced Line Out of the XLR variety and Preamp and Speaker Out jack sockets, the latter for use with the Speaker In socket on the lower section. The remaining features relate to running the Briefcase using an

removing the large black plate on the bottom of the unit with one of the Allen keys supplied and replenish using the DC Input battery charging socket. Two terminals on the lower section, labelled 'Battery', should then be connected to the corresponding pair above using the internal battery terminal links provided. Add to this the fact that you can both charge and run the Briefcase from your car's cigarette lighter, and you've got one seriously portable combo.

## SOUNDS

Let's make one thing clear at the outset, in case you haven't sussed it already: the Briefcase is not a gigging amp. Even though it's rated at 100W, the dimensions of the box itself and the provision of only two speakers make it impossible to use the Briefcase alone even for on-stage monitoring. But that's not the reason behind this amp: we're talking quality of sound here, so it's really a highly portable practising facility and a tool for recording (in the broadest sense). The manual states that the Briefcase can handle a low B on a five- or six-string bass provided that 'not too much bass boost is used', so we plugged in our extended-range Yamaha to see whether this was indeed the case.

What emerged with the master volume just past halfway was a pretty exact version of the Yamaha's acoustic tone – fat, aggressive, full-range and very clean. The B-string tone is excellent: fully realised with not a hint of frequency-led distortion, and there's far more width available than you need or would expect. Level-wise, we found that much more of a nudge added unwelcome fuzz to the

## FACTFILE

### PJB BRIEFCASE

**Description:** Single-channel, 100W transistor combo. Two PJB full-range 5" speakers. 17mm marine grade plywood cabinet with rear porting. Made in USA

**Price:** £450

**Controls:** Master Volume knob, five-band graphic EQ, in-built limiter/compressor with On/Off switch and level control. Input, Preamp Out and Headphone Out jack sockets, balanced line out XLR socket. Internal compartment for 12V DC battery operation with onboard terminals and charging socket

**Range Options:** None

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sound, but what's available is way beyond adequate. There's also some pleasing warmth on offer, so in this case clean does not mean clinical.

In terms of the EQ, boosting bass (50Hz) is an option, but you can't go further than halfway before distortion rears up. This said, the amount of extra width available is surprising and your note retains an excellent level of focus. The 160Hz low mid slider requires a similar amount of care with a powerful active bass, and the realistic limit is only around half-boost. At this point your sound acquires a dark, brooding quality with reduced attack, a smoother edge and more width-based impact.

Fiddling with 630Hz (middle) is great fun: there's a large amount of high-impact punch available at full boost with only the tiniest hint of overload. It's real snarling-dog stuff, this, but the really pleasing element is the total lack of accentuated instrument noise. If you max-out the high mid (2.5kHz) slider, however, you'll get a bright, metallic edge; just a few notches below this seems to simply freshen up the overall clarity of the Briefcase.

The fifth slider (12kHz) is excellent in two respects: firstly, anywhere near full boost adds an aggressive snap to higher notes and accentuates bottom-end bite while a radical cut throws a silk sheet over the whole thing without seriously impinging on clarity.



## VERDICT

Okay, so £450 is a lot to spend on something that won't fulfil all your needs, but the Briefcase never pretends to be able to do that. Its sheer versatility and adaptability within obvious limits are the real

plus points, as is the excellent variety of quality sounds on offer. If you're serious about your tone in every single playing environment, maybe you should try out the Briefcase for yourself.