



ZT Custom Shop

JAZZ CLUB AND LEE RANALDO CLUB COMBOS

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

AFTER FORGING A stellar reputation for its compact yet powerful Club and Lunchbox models, ZT Amplifiers of Benicia, California, has launched its Custom Shop on the back of two new combos: the Jazz Club and the Lee Ranaldo Club. Still relatively compact and more than powerful enough to live up to the company's motto, "The Loudest Little Amps in the World," this pair is primed to preach the solid-state gospel amid the hordes of boutique tube amp offerings and multifunctional digital modelers.

CUSTOM SHOP JAZZ CLUB COMBO

The name says it all, but what it doesn't immediately reveal is that this club-sized combo was designed in collaboration with some of the finest jazz players working today, including Dave Stryker, Charlie Apicella, Vic Juris and Randy Vincent, with the goal of optimizing the tone of archtop-electric guitars. One glance — and that description — tells you that the Jazz Club aims straight at territory dominated by the Polytone Mini Brute lineup over the years. Yet, this ZT Custom Shop model nicely freshens up the format without dangling any unnecessary shiny objects to tempt you off course. Specific design goals included pristine but rich clean tones at extremely high volumes, and extended low frequencies.

Presenting a sleek retro-modern look, the cabinet measures 15 by 14 by 11 inches. It's made from a combination of plywood and MDF coated in industrial-grade midnight-blue textured paint and features a metal speaker grille. Inside, a 220-watt, solid-state, Class D amplifier translates the signal from a solid-state preamp with straightforward yet versatile controls to a front-mounted 12-inch neodymium speaker. All that, and it's just a 25.8-pound carry at the end of the night. Reverb is a digital spring emulation, and there's both an effects loop and a speaker-emulated XLR D.I. to take it to the board, along with an extension-speaker out and

accompanying mute switch to turn off the internal speaker.

With an archtop Epiphone Broadway plugged in, this combo immediately delivered delusions of bop and swing grandeur to this hack's not-quite-Berklee-certified jazz riffs, and quickly put a big smile on my face. This is *the sound*, delivered in full, rich robust glory without a hint of hair or fizz, but with a nice touch of edge and bite when you balance the gain and volume controls. I enjoyed it most with the former up pretty high to simulate just a touch of tube-like harmonic thickening. But even maxed out with the volume knob (i.e. master) down to a whisper, there's not a jot of clipping to be generated here. Add a dollop of reverb — which is lush, spatial and avoids washing out the tone even when cranked quite high — and it's a fast track to the Village Vanguard. This petite combo even jazzed up the neck pickups of my Les Paul and Telecaster in grand style, while ably handling clean blues, rockabilly and country without a complaint.

And is it that loud? That 220-watt rating certainly looks formidable, and, in technical terms, the Jazz Club can get pretty darn loud, but fully cranked I didn't quite feel chased from the room the way I did when playing, side-by-side, a 50-watt Friedman Small Box head set with the master a little past half way into a 1x12 extension cab. But so many other factors affect perceived volume, and it's not worth parsing the fine points here. Suffice to say the Jazz Club is more than loud enough for most jazz clubs and sounds great in the process, retaining astounding headroom and a firm low end even up toward its maximum capabilities. Tasty.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OUTLINE PRESS



LEE RANALDO CLUB

Having beaten his 2010 ZT Club combo into submission, Sonic Youth co-founder and preeminent New York City underground scenester Lee Ranaldo figured it was time for a new amp, and ZT saw a great opportunity to give him what he was after. Using the original Club model as a springboard, the Custom Shop Lee Ranaldo Club was born. This signature combo bears similarities to the Jazz Club (it contains the same 220-watt Class D powerhouse and 12-inch Eminence neodymium speaker, and offers the same back-panel features), but the cab is a little shallower at 15 by 14 by 9 inches, which brings the weight down to 24 pounds. Visual twists are revealed in the Ranaldo-approved cosmetics of matte-black textured paint with Jasper Johns–inspired “target” speaker grille, as seen on many of the guitarist’s past amps.

Although the control panel looks much the same as the Jazz Club’s, it flips the order of the EQ, giving treble, mid and bass and fronts a differently structured preamp circuit. All in all, it’s a superbly handy and portable package for city-dwelling noise crafters, or any guitar player whose gig or rehearsal requirements could benefit from a light amp

with a compact footprint.

I tested the Lee Ranaldo Club with a Les Paul, a Telecaster and a Ron Thorn G/T with staple-top P-90s (sorry, no Jazzmaster today), and used several different drive boxes in the front and a handful of delay and modulation pedals in the loop. Right from the start, though, it was clear that you have to reconfigure your perceptions with this amp, particularly if you’re a habitual tube-amp player. This little combo has very high headroom, and without the tube compression most of us are used to, its response to your picking attack is also extremely immediate. It will induce just a hint of breakup with the gain maxed out, adding girth and bite to rock riffs that still lean into the clean spectrum, while delivering nearly unprecedented low-end firmness and uncanny note separation. And while it’s certainly a solid-state guitar amp, the Lee Ranaldo Club has an appealing sweetness throughout its range, along with a plummy richness and a satisfying smoothness to the tone and response, despite the immediacy of its delivery.

The EQ is tremendously versatile, particularly the mid control, which you’re unlikely to dial past early afternoon unless you’re seeking dramatic cocked-wah-like effects.

However, a huge range of voices lurks between the off position

and one o’clock. Stomp on a Tube Screamer, a Klone or a JHS Angry Charlie, to name but three overdrive pedals, and the result is even more naked and in your face. Rather than clipping the early gain stages, as such pedals would into a tube amp, the Lee Ranaldo Club yields powerful overdrive sounds, once you learn to work with it. All that, and this little thing is loud — notably louder than the Jazz Club with each amp’s gain and volume knobs set to about 50 percent. That is partly thanks to its increased front-end gain and more pronounced midrange. Played clean with a touch of reverb, it can sound like a Twin Reverb. Cranked up a little more, with an overdrive pedal in front, and a Hiwatt half-stack comes more to mind. It’s crazy, fun and a brave new world of sound for adventurous guitarists. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

Jazz Club Combo

CONTACT ztcustomshop.com

PRICE \$1,299 street

CHANNELS 1

CONTROLS Gain, bass, mid, treble, volume, reverb

POWER 220-watt RMS Class D solid-state power amplifier

EXTRAS External speaker out with internal speaker mute, speaker-voiced XLR D.I. output, effects loop, digitally emulated spring-type reverb

SPEAKER Custom-designed Eminence 12" with neodymium magnet

WEIGHT 25.8 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS A compact and well-made combo that yields warm, delectable jazz tones with boatloads of headroom

CONCERNS None

Lee Ranaldo Club Combo

CONTACT ztcustomshop.com

PRICE \$1,499 street

CHANNELS 1

CONTROLS Gain, treble, mid, bass, volume, reverb

POWER 220-watt RMS Class D solid-state power amplifier

EXTRAS External speaker out with internal speaker mute, speaker-voiced XLR DI output, effects loop, digitally emulated spring-type reverb

SPEAKER Custom-designed Eminence 12" with neodymium magnet

WEIGHT 24 lbs

BUILT USA

KUDOS A compelling and original voice, surprising versatility, and tons of volume in an astoundingly light and compact combo

CONCERNS Pricey, but that’s reflected in the quality of design and construction

