



FIRST PLAY



**HUGHES & KETTNER
BLACK SPIRIT 200 HEAD**
£879

WHAT IS IT? A solid-state version of the GrandMeister Deluxe 40, with four programmable channels, digital effects and extensive MIDI control

Solid Choice

The German amp guru ditches the valves and adds a highly portable, lightweight and hugely versatile solid-state monster to its catalogue

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Joby Sessions & Neil Godwin

The past three decades have seen Hughes & Kettner transform from 'Hughes who?' into one of the world's most respected names in guitar amplification. Over the years, we've seen a steady stream of innovative products, from the affordable and authentic-sounding solid-state Attax, to the jaw-dropping all-digital ZenTera, and vintage-inspired valve designs such as the Puretone. Leveraging equally high levels of expertise in solid-state, digital and valve design has also resulted in some of the most versatile amps available today, such as the TriAmp Mark 3 and the GrandMeister Deluxe 40, which seamlessly blend valve tone, digital effects and MIDI control for massive versatility. Now there's a new product that threatens to shake things up a little more, the Black Spirit 200.

Based on the same format as the award-winning valve-powered GrandMeister Deluxe head, the Black Spirit 200 is an analogue solid-state amp teamed with digital control and effects, all combined in a new innovation called the Bionic Spirit Tone





1. Of the front-panel controls, the Sagging feature emulates the response of a valve amp output stage that's being pushed hard; the switch doubles as the cabinet type selector for the Black Spirit's built-in Red Box DI. Meanwhile, the Black Spirit's higher gain sounds can be tamed with its intelligent two-stage noise gate, also found among the front-panel controls

Generator. We don't know exactly what's inside the Spirit Tone Generator as it's encased in plastic and lit by red LEDs, but it looks impressive viewed through the blue illuminated control panel.

The control layout is quite similar to the valve-powered GrandMeister Deluxe head. There are four channels (Clean, Crunch, Lead and Ultra) that can be switched via MIDI, foot controllers or the rotary switch on the right of the control panel. Familiar gain, volume and tone knobs double as effects editing for the Black Spirit's onboard digital sorcery, together with presence

This head combines authentic analogue 'real amp' tones with solid-state reliability and consistency

and resonance controls to shape the power stage's response. A new 'Sagging' feature is intended to emulate the squashed dynamics of a valve output stage being driven hard. It offers eight sag settings and the switch doubles as the cabinet emulation selector for the latest Red Box AE DI output, which you'll find on the rear panel. There's a single speaker jack with selectable output levels and a choice of full-range or guitar voicing, plus an effects loop, aux in and MIDI In and Out/Thru sockets.

Internally, the Black Spirit 200 is built to H&K's usual high standards, with robust PCBs, ultra-clean wiring and soldering. Because there are no valves, the amp doesn't need bulky transformers, making it exceptionally portable – at just under 8lb it's small and light enough to fit anywhere.

Feel & Sounds

The Black Spirit's sounds are impressive. The four channels here cover practically



2. The Spirit Tone Generator is a digitally controlled analogue solid-state circuit that's at the core of the amp's great sounds

any musical need, from spanky high-headroom cleans, to blazing lead sounds from the Ultra channel, with huge sustain. Hiss and hum levels are low – there's some hiss at very high gain settings, which is easy to tame with the Black Spirit's noise gate.

Importantly, milder overdrives are very authentic, helped by the sag feature, which accurately captures the pushed dynamics of a smaller valve amp being driven hard. While the Black Spirit 200 isn't a 'who do you do' modelling amp, it's easy to dial in very realistic emulations of classic Plexi, tweed and blackface sounds that respond almost as well as the real thing, or at least to the point where nobody listening to a live or recorded mix would be able to tell the sound wasn't coming from valves.

The effects are equally good, with studio quality reverb and delay alongside chorus, phaser, flanger and tremolo. Adding effects into the Black Spirit's core tones is easy: press the FX Access switch and the amp's

front panel controls flip into effects editing mode. Once you're happy with the sound, press the Store button and the whole patch is saved. If you need more effects, there's a loop that can be programmed per patch to accommodate your outboard stompboxes. You can store a different patch for each of the four channels using the optional FSM-432 foot controller. You can have up to 128 pre-sets, while the soon-to-be-available iOS app should allow unlimited patch storage along with real-time remote control, like the GrandMeister version.

The Black Spirit's connectivity is impressive, too. The speaker output can be

3. The FSM-432 foot controller is an optional extra, but we'd recommend it in order to take advantage of all the Black Spirit's features and to store more patches



4. The built-in industry standard Red Box AE provides an excellent speaker-emulated balanced output. There are eight programmable cabinet types, selectable from the front panel

5. The Black Spirit's effects loop is programmable via MIDI, which also controls just about every feature on the amp. Everything can be stored and saved in a patch, apart from the global master volume position



switched down from 200 watts to 20 or just two for home use, and can be plugged into full-range cabinets as well as regular guitar speakers. Meanwhile, the Red Box AE provides a superb speaker-emulated output for recording and stage PA on balanced XLR, with eight programmable settings and mic/line level switching.

Verdict

The Black Spirit 200 is one of the best non-valve amps we've ever tried, combining authentic analogue 'real amp' tones with solid-state reliability and night-after-night consistency. Add digital effects, MIDI switching and patch storage, not to mention the Red Box speaker emulation, and this is clearly a formidably versatile tool that can cover almost any need.

One of the Black Spirit's other main selling points is its portability; it's not much bigger than a large loaf of bread and weighs about the same as a good Les Paul.

However, note that the carry bag that was part of the TubeMeister amp package is sold as an extra here. Similarly, the FSM-432 foot-controller is almost an essential if you want to make full use of the Black Spirit's features and store more than four patches. Other MIDI pedals are available, but the FSM-432 is phantom-powered from the amp and comes ready-programmed. We do think both accessories should be more affordable, perhaps as part of optional package deals. There's also an iPad app that allows real-time remote control (not available at the time of writing, but should be released soon).

The amp itself is relatively expensive but justifiably so, as it can do so much. At around £400 less than the valve-powered GrandMeister Deluxe 40, it represents good value for money, particularly as it appeals across such a wide market, from project studio owners to weekend warriors and touring pros. **G**



HUGHES & KETTNER BLACK SPIRIT 200 HEAD

PRICE: £879

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Solid-state preamp and power amp with digital effects

OUTPUT: 200W RMS, switchable to 20W or 2W

VALVES: None

DIMENSIONS: 410 (w) x 155 (h) x 150mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8

CABINET: Steel/plastic

CHANNELS: 4, MIDI-programmable

CONTROLS: Master volume, presence, resonance, sagging, reverb, treble, mid, bass, volume, gain, channel select, boost switch, FX loop switch, FX access/store switches

FOOTSWITCH: Optional

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Onboard digital effects, Red Box AE speaker emulated DI. Bluetooth audio streaming and remote control with iOS app (coming soon)

OPTIONS: The phantom-powered FSM-432 MIDI foot controller unleashes the Black Spirit's performance potential for £185; a soft carry bag costs £36.99

RANGE OPTIONS: None

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PROS Stacks of functionality; excellent core tones; very portable

CONS The carry bag and foot controller are expensive additions; there's no simpler non-MIDI foot-switching alternative