

FIRST PLAY



SUPRO BLUES KING 12
£599

WHAT IS IT? Single-ended valve combo, partly inspired by the 1950s Comet, with a built-in FET cascaded overdrive circuit

Hail To The King

With a design that looks back to the 50s and some future-proof internal additions, Supro's latest has some surprises under the hood and a rather attractive price

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

One of the world's oldest and most revered amplification brands, Supro, has been enjoying a long-overdue renaissance in the capable hands of New York-based Absara Audio, headed up by Pigtronix effects and all-round tone guru David Koltai. It's been a long and winding road for the brand, which can trace its origin back to the mid 1920s and the beginning of the Chicago blues scene, with which it's been linked ever since. Supro disappeared in the 1970s, but not before Jimmy Page used the earthy, organic tones of a Model 24 to cut some early Led Zeppelin tracks. After a long layoff, it's been satisfying to see Absara successfully bring the brand back to life with a carefully blended mixture of old and new features, sometimes in the same product. A prime example of the modern Supro approach is this new Blues King 12 combo.

The very portable 1x12 combo uses a lightweight poplar cabinet that, in shape, is based on the 50s Valco/Supro Comet with a distinctive chopped loudspeaker porthole and white string accents running around the amp either side of the control panel. Poplar plywood (sometimes called furniture plywood) is a 'secret sauce' for top boutique builders. Weighing about a third less than birch plywood, it's highly resonant and significantly improves portability without affecting cabinet strength.

It's easy to imagine this amp, with its fat vintage tone, earning its keep in a 50s Chicago blues club



The Blues King takes some of its styling cues from the 1950s Valco/Supro Comet combo



1. The Blues King's custom-made BK12 driver was specifically designed to capture the magic of the field-coil speakers that were used in early vintage American valve amps

2. The rear panel features include a series effects loop and a line out for studio or live desk connections

3. The boost and gain switches operate a cascaded FET overdrive section, adding a wide range of distortion colours, from vintage to decidedly modern

The electronics are housed in a robust steel chassis, which is bolted to the cabinet so the back panel can be removed for easy servicing. Like all modern Supros, the Blues King uses high-quality printed circuit boards; a large one holds nearly all the small components including valve bases and controls, with a smaller one for the mains and standby switches. As well as a single 6L6 power valve and a 12AX7 in the preamp, the Blues King has a FET-based cascaded gain stage accessed from two toggle switches on the control panel, or the supplied two-button footswitch. There's also a vintage-sounding spring reverb, which makes a change from the digital reverbs many amp builders favour these days.

The Blues King's single-ended pure class-A output stage drives a special BK75 12-inch loudspeaker, which is designed

Think of it as a fatter, punchier tweed Champ and you won't be too far off the mark

to replicate the tones of vintage field-coil speakers. Field-coil speakers use an electromagnet instead of a permanent magnet; they were popular in the early days of amplification because strong permanent magnets were very heavy back then. As magnet technology improved, the field-coil speaker was rendered all but obsolete, though some esoteric hi-fi speaker manufacturers still use them. Some say that field-coil speakers have a particularly fast accurate response. However, today, it's quite easy to replicate any field-coil characteristic with modern permanent magnets.

The rear-facing control panel lettering is another nod to amp designs of yesteryear – in the early days before PA systems, amps were pushed toward the front of the stage and guitarists would stand behind them. The boost and gain toggle switches can be operated remotely from a two-button footswitch that comes as part of the package. The buttons are clearly marked but there are no LED indicators. Used live – and you certainly can use the Blues King live – there often isn't time or light to





read things, and a couple of coloured LEDs with control panel lettering the right way up would help improve usability. However, these are minor annoyances that don't detract from the amp's performance.

The Blues King is typical of what we've come to expect from the revived Supro brand: it's a well-built amp, that's good looking and blends vintage design inspiration with highly reliable modern construction techniques and components that won't let you down.

Feel & Sounds

The Blues King has a fat, vintage tone to match its looks. In fact, think of it as a fatter, punchier tweed Champ and you won't be too far off the mark. The unboosted preamp is relatively low gain, making it very useful for pedals, while the regular three-band EQ is easy to dial in and works equally well with humbuckers and single coils. The advantage of the Blues King's single-ended power stage is that you can turn it up more, making it easier to push into distortion. The resulting tones are very authentic-sounding – it's easy to imagine this amp earning its keep in a 50s Chicago blues club.

The FET preamp adds significant versatility. You can kick in the boost for a medium drive or use the gain for a much more aggressive, modern drive that's great for solos. Both switches work independently, so you can use the gain function with or without boost.

The spring reverb effect is smooth and warm, again very-vintage sounding, and at lower levels it adds a nice subtle ambience. Turning it up will get you some very usable surf and 60s pop sounds.

As ever, we tried a variety of different guitars with the Blues King and while it flatters humbuckers and single coils, we felt the best sounds came from bright PAF-style humbuckers or P-90-type pickups. It's loud for a 15-watter – the extra thump from the 12-inch BK75 loudspeaker delivers more than enough punch for an average unmic'd pub gig – while, electrically, the amp is well behaved, with low levels of hiss and hum, making it ideal for recording and home use.

Verdict

This is an impressive little combo: it's good looking, compact and portable, and sounds great in a wide range of musical styles. You can go from vintage blues and country to classic and modern rock thanks to the built-in FET drive circuit – it's like having your favourite drive pedal inside the amp. The reverb is a welcome bonus. And while some of the new Supros seem on the pricey side, this one is relatively affordable and appears excellent value for money.

While it would be an ideal amp for backstage warm-ups for those of you lucky enough to play at that level, for most of us it's simply a great grab 'n' go amp for smaller gigs and perfect for studios and bedrooms. Oh, and it looks damn cool, too. **G**



SUPRO BLUES KING 12

PRICE: £599

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Hybrid valve/solid-state preamp and class A valve power amp

OUTPUT: 15W RMS

VALVES: 1x 12AX7, 1x 6L6

DIMENSIONS: 440 (w) x 420 (h) x 190mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 13/29

CABINET: Poplar

LOUDSPEAKERS: 1x custom-design Supro BK12 12"

CHANNELS: 1, with 2-stage footswitchable boost

CONTROLS: Gain, volume, bass, mid, treble, reverb level. Boost and gain toggle switches

FOOTSWITCH: 2-button footswitch toggles gain and boost functions

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Line out, series effects loop, spring reverb

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Previous to the Blues King, the range kicked off with the Super 1x8 Class A 6V6-equipped single-ended, 5W combo, with or without reverb at £699 and £999 respectively

JHS

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PROS A lot of tone from a deceptively simple control panel; it can sound vintage or modern at the touch of a button

CONS Footswitch has no status LEDs; the vintage-style upside-down control panel lettering is difficult to read quickly from in front of the amp