

Reviews: Three guitar practice amps

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I recently started teaching guitar at a new school and found myself needing a practice amp to take along with me. I still remember my first amp, a Ross Fame 10 combo, which, like many amps in its class, had an anaemic clean tone and a horrific distortion option. There are still plenty of products out there that are no better than that little black box I started with so many years ago, and I hope this comparison saves your ears and wallets from unnecessary disappointment.

Blackstar Debut 10E

The Blackstar Debut 10E is a compact, solid-state 10-watt amp that

focuses on simplicity. What stands out about this amp is its robust design; it doesn't feel like a 'landfill' product destined for a three-year lifespan. I personally appreciate that this amp uses a mains power cord instead of a laptop-style power supply, which I've always found flimsy and a bit of a pain to use. It's worth noting that some micro amps don't even come with a power supply anymore, presumably to keep the retail price down.

I'm well acquainted with this amp as it was in a teaching room I once worked in, and I thought it sounded great for such a small unit. It's not overloaded with unnecessary features, such as dozens of amp types and effects which can sometimes work against a novice student. While we don't have Bluetooth on the Debut 10, there is an auxiliary input for a mini jack cable plus an output for headphones or direct recording. What may not be immediately apparent is that you get two speakers with the amp, which provides a superior playback experience compared to a typical mono setup. The stereo spread isn't going to be huge due to the size of the amp, but it's a nice feature worth mentioning.

Positive Grid Spark Go



Next is the Positive Grid Spark Go, which takes a different approach. This is a digital modelling unit with multiple digital recreations of

amplifiers and effects, although accessing these requires connecting it to the associated app on a smartphone. One of the standout aspects of the Spark Go is its array of built-in practice tools, including smart jam tracks and tone presets. I think the hybrid design of the Spark Go is very clever, allowing you to have your presets on your mobile device and then load them into the hardware, which has minimal controls to keep size, weight, and distractions down.

The Spark Go is also a Bluetooth speaker and features a rechargeable battery that can last up to eight hours. Due to its unique design, powerful software and high-quality amp modelling, this practice amp comes in at a slightly higher price point than the other options; however, it is arguably a more inspiring product for young guitarists or those seeking a mobile option. From the perspective of a peripatetic teacher, I find this choice highly desirable due to its compact size and ability to output quality guitar tone.

NUX Mighty Lite BT MkII

Similar to the Spark Go, the NUX offers Bluetooth connectivity, editing via an app, and a battery option, but this time it's not rechargeable. One unique feature of the NUX Mighty Lite is its built-in drum machine, a fantastic tool for students in a school setting who are not allowed to use their mobile devices for Bluetooth playback. I think the 'Mighty Lite' has struck the sweet spot with hardware functionality and mobile integration; there are just enough physical controls on the top of the amp to access the main features, leaving the app as a nice addition rather than a necessity.



I think the area in which the NUX may suffer is that it is not a particularly recognisable brand with a history of producing a wide range of budget musical products. In recent times, however, they are now being distributed in the UK through reputable retailers, so hopefully any concerns regarding warranty and support can be put aside.

Conclusion

Each of these amps offers something distinct, depending on your needs for lessons or practice sessions. The Blackstar Debut 10E is ideal for those who want a simple, reliable, and great-sounding amp without too many bells and whistles. The Positive Grid Spark Go offers incredible versatility with its range of modelling features and smart practice tools, although it comes at a higher price point. Finally, the NUX Mighty Lite BT MkII strikes an excellent balance between affordability and functionality.