

ULTRASOUND AG-50DS4 ACOUSTIC GUITAR AMPLIFIER By Julie Bergman

Ultrasound Amplifiers' new AG-50 DS4 has taken the best features of the earlier Ultrasound 50-watt models and combined them with the layout and improvements of its popular bigger daddy, the CP-100, to create a solid, versatile, economical and transparent sounding acoustic guitar amp.

The AG-50 series of Ultrasound Amps, weighing in around 25 pounds and sporting two 8" coaxial speakers, offered players a more substantial tone and additional features than the baby of the line, the 20 pound AG-30 that has a single input, and single 8" speaker. But when the CP-100 stopped me in my tracks at the January 2006 NAMM show with its well constructed and thought out controls, features, and no-nonsense acoustic reproduction, I, for one, found myself wishing for a package with less wattage and weight, but the same wow factor.

Ultrasound has achieved that with the DS4. Players can now have those sweet twin 8" stereo speakers of its predecessor 50-watt models, with most of the jazz of the CP-100 (which definitely has its place for larger venues, with its beefy 100-watt power amp and one 8" driver and coaxial super tweeter). The DS4 is six pounds less than the CP-100 (think of it as lighter by the weight of one Fender Strat), and has the same ergonomic layout of the CP-100's control panel. The digital effects are now moved to the right of the panel ala the CP-100, to a more instinctive location than the previous incarnations of the AG-50 where the effects controls were situated between channels. Another major improvement, especially from the singer/player perspective, is that the mic Channel 1 and Channel 2 combo inputs now have 15V Phantom power. And those are just the improvements on the amps front panel!

Another milestone for the DS4, significant for solo players as well as increasing the amps usefulness as a practice tool, is the fact that it now has the same capacity as the CP-100

to accommodate direct input of an ipod, drum machine, tape player or CD player for playing with prerecorded tracks. The the back of the amp are accompanied by an inset knob which adjusts the volume level of the TAPE/CD input. The TAPE/CD signal is pre MASTER control, meaning that the master volume setting will affect the loudness of the TAPE/CD input signal, but you now have more volume control from the start.

The two channel combo inputs of the DS4, like its earlier versions and the CP-100 make for a very versatile unit. INPUT 1 is a combo input designed for both mic level (XLR) or instrument level (1/4") signals. The 1/4" Tip/Ring/Sleeve input jack is the ticket for keyboards, drums machines and high-impedance microphones. It's geared toward a flat response channel to accommodate any acoustic instrument or mic signal.

The Channel 2 combo input is also designed for both mic level and instrument level signals, but is designed primarily for acoustic guitar. Both channels have bass, treble and volume controls, but Channel 2 is where you find your Notch Filter dial and on/off switch, and the Shape on/off toggle switch which is a mid dip control, cutting mid frequencies and boosting high and low frequencies in the on position.

The master section provides the Master Volume control, a Pilot/Limit light indicator (if the power amp gets to full power, the onboard limiter will be enabled, allowing the amp to be played at full power without distortion), a three way toggle switch so you can route the digital effects to Channel 1, 2, or both, and the Effects Mode and Effects Level controls, which allow you to mix in zero to 50% of the effect to the guitar signal.

The DS4 has the same facility as the earlier AG-50s and the CP-100 to go direct out to feed recording or PA equipment, plus an effects send and return (Channel 2), an unbalanced line out which can also drive a slave

amp or powered extension speaker, and an effects footswitch jack. With the addition of the Tape/CD inputs, the headphone jack has been usurped, but I found that in situations where you need to play very quietly, you'll still have preserving relations with your neighbors.

Tested with a Collings OM2H with a D-Tar Wave-Length under saddle transducer, which packs a powerful punch with its 18 volt power train, a lush acoustic sound was the plug and play response, consistent at lower and higher volumes. Some modest tweaking with the Notch Filter and EQ produced a full bodied result without offending frequencies, and there was no "piezo quack" to be heard. Plugging in a Martin 00016GT with a Fishman Acoustic Natural Matrix under saddle pick up produced similar transparent amplification, taking barely seconds to find the sweet spot and start sampling the effects.

Put through its paces using the Collings with a DigiTech JamMan looper/phrase sampler, the DS4 also reproduced the sound of the recorded phrases with very accurate duplication.

The 16 digital effects contain some pleasing reverbs, stereo chorus, chorus/reverb combinations, a rotary speaker emulation, and a stereo flanger setting. Many of the effects have a warm analog feel, definitely a cut above the norm for a small amp's digital sound palate.

The DS4 is a powerful and honest amplifier, in a small enough package so that when your roadie doesn't show up or you wear all the hats, you can pack off your guitar in one hand, the DS4 in the other, and take your music on the road with no compromises.

Julie Bergman is a freelance writer, guitarist and career Private Investigator. She has written artist features, gear and studio articles for music and guitar magazines for the past five years, including frequent contributions to Acoustic Guitar magazine.