

GEAR Bench Test



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AXL Akita AK40 TESTED BY DARRIN FOX

SPECS | AXL Musical Instruments, (415) 508-1398; axlguitars.com

PRICE	\$799 retail/\$595 street
CHANNELS	Two
CONTROLS	Clean Volume, Overdrive Gain, Overdrive Level, Reverb, Master Volume; shared Treble, Mid, and Bass controls
TUBES	Four Electro-Harmonix EL84 output tubes; Four Sovtek 12AX7 preamp tubes
POWER	40 watts
EXTRAS	Switchable series/parallel effects loop, two extension speaker outs, miniature Accutronics reverb tank
SPEAKERS	Two Alphantone 12" ceramic speakers
WEIGHT	53.5 lbs
KUDOS	Affordable. Loud. Good clean tones. Great crunch tones. Searing metal sounds. Hip one-of-a-kind look.
CONCERNS	Reverb is just okay.

DON'T LOOK NOW, BUT HIP-LOOKING TUBE COMBO amps are getting insanely affordable. Witness the Akita AK40, a 2x12 rig that struts an über-rustic aesthetic with its brushed copper control panel and veneer birch cabinet that sports finger-joint construction (blond Tolex covering is also available). Construction appointments are as you'd expect from an amp in this price range. PC boards grip the amp's circuitry, as well as all of the pots and jacks. Cabinet construction is very clean inside and out, and although the Akita is technically a closed-back affair, the huge wooden back panel has a perforated metal grate that allows sound to spill out like an open-back design. Unfortunately, the panel adds significantly to the Akita's heft.

I tested the Akita with a Fender Telecaster,



Dig the rustic vibe of the Akita's control panel and knobs. Woof!

GEAR AXL



The vast expanse of the Akita's cabinet houses two 12" speakers and a mini Accutronics reverb tank.

a Gibson SG, and a Gibson Les Paul. With my Telecaster, the Akita's clean tones were loaded with crystalline sheen. Straddling the line between classic Fender and Vox sounds, the Akita even brought some chimey magic out of our house Les Paul Standard, making it easy to elicit pinging harmonics and complex, bell-like chords. With single-coil equipped guitars, you need to keep the Treble control in check (well under halfway) as the Akita has enough high-end on tap to be unkind to folks in the front row. The Akita's tones also stay clean as you crank the Master Volume, but as you begin to turn this channel up, the amp really bares its teeth with wondrous semi-dirty tones that, in my experience, are nearly unheard of in an amp in this price range. With just a hint of hair around the notes, these tones offer a stinging, pointed attack, without being harsh or succumbing to crashiness as you dig in with your pick—perfect for bluesy soloing and biting power-chord banging. And, by backing off your guitar's volume control, you can call off the AK40's grind and get right back into the clean zone. Good boy Akita—you get a Milk-Bone for that!

Jumping over to the Overdrive channel using the Channel Select button (or the included footswitch), you're instantly transported into modern rock/metal high-gain land. Subtlety is out the window here, as even with the Gain turned nearly all the way down, the Akita snarls with fierce, aggressive attack. If you're not a fan of hyper-sizzle rock tones, you're out of luck, because that is what the Akita's Overdrive channel is bred to do. For example, I attempted to dial in smoother lead tones with a nice midrange squawk à la Larry Carlton, but the dog wouldn't hunt. However, for high-power metal riffing and freak-shred tones, the Akita excels mightily. Its low-end stays taught and forceful—even at high volumes—and the upper midrange slice allows it to cut through the din of cymbals,

bass, and another guitarist quite nicely. The distorted tones are somewhat dynamic when you lighten your touch or roll back your guitar's volume knob, but, honestly, these sounds are so friggin' searing and so obviously geared towards red-faced metal mayhem that it's tough to knock them for not cleaning up pristinely. At first, I thought the shared EQ between the Overdrive and Clean channels would severely limit me, but it never became a problem, because the Clean side is voiced plenty bright. This allowed me to dial down the Treble control for the distorted tones, and not worry about wrangling the jangle from the Clean side. The only niggle I have with the Akita's distorted tones is that there tends to be a bit too much low-end rumble that doesn't sound attached to the notes being played. I found myself having to dump the Bass control quite a lot to get rid of this phenomenon with the Akita's heavier tones, but at least I was able to do it.

The Akita's reverb is merely serviceable. It adds some depth and dimension in low settings, but as you turn it up, it gets cavernous and indistinct without a trace of the drippy attack that makes spring reverb the mutt's nuts. I'm not sure if it's the circuit, or the Altoid-size tank that's the culprit for the somewhat lackluster 'verb, but looking at the tiny box residing in the Akita's expansive cabinet, I can't help but wonder what a full-size tank would add to the amp's already happening tones—especially the clean sounds. Still, it's better than no reverb at all.

With its sparkling clean textures, and downright nasty distorted metal tones, the Akita AK40 would be a good bargain for gigging players, as well as those looking to grow into an amp that will grow with them. But the fact that the Akita flaunts some really happening crunch tones on its Clean channel is a very impressive attribute. Bravo to AXL for delivering an amp that is handsome, affordable, and most important, *musical*. 