



PRODUCT REVIEW

LOUIS ELECTRIC

KR-12 Head and Cabinet

BY CHRIS BURGESS



Knowing Louis Rosano's reputation among boutique amp enthusiasts and the list of artists who've sought out both his amps and his skills as a repairman, it's easy to expect

a great-sounding amp with an old-school energy. Add in the fact that the design of the original KR-12 combo came out of his consultations with Keith Richards and Hubert

Sumlin, and that Robben Ford and Jorma Kaukonen both went for the new KR-12 head and 2x12 cab configuration after hearing and playing one on tour, and it becomes easier to



suspect that it's not just great tone that makes this particular amplifier so highly regarded. In fact, it is sturdily built and has great tone, but it also possesses an uncommon versatility and real workhorse simplicity. That's ideal for any kind of *bona fide* blues, jazz, or straight-up rock 'n' roll, of any era.

The head and cabinet version of the KR-12 is basically the same handwired amplifier as the combo; the pine cabinet and aluminum chassis construction are both top notch, and there are a number of thoughtful details that add to the amp's appeal, such as the large, comfortable handles, and the extra tall legs on the head, so it sits sturdily on top of the speakers without wobbling. Both head and speaker cabinet are covered in black tolex with salt-and-pepper grille cloth, giving it a clean, classic look, and since the whole rig is only 33" tall, the control panel is on top of the head rather than on the front, saving you from having to crouch or bend over in front of it to make adjustments.

The 50-Watt amplifier uses three 12AX7 pre-amp tubes, two EL34 output tubes (it can also run 6L6s), and a 5AR4 rectifier, and has two inputs for the Normal channel and two for the Gain channel, in four increasing gain stages. The control panel includes large chickenhead knobs for Volume, Master Volume, Treble, Bass, Middle and Presence, as well as On/Off, Standby and ground switches, and an amber indicator lamp. The accompanying 8-ohm 2x12, open-backed pine cabinet uses dovetail joint construction and carries a pair of 12" Celestion G12H30 speakers.

One of Louis's personal touches is the Damping control, which allows you to change the amount of negative feedback in the power section using a potentiometer on the rear of the chassis. From the tightest damping to the most open, the control changes bloom and volume of notes appreciably, along with the feel and response of the amp, offering additional versatility to shaping the amp's tone and performance characteristics. There is no reverb, trem or effects loop here—but I wouldn't argue with those who say they're not necessary. The Master Volume control this KR-12 provides is updated from the original design; Louis began using it in more recent combos to better accommodate the different gain stages of the preamp. It is very useable, making it a simple task to get

nice saturated dirty tones at respectable levels—but this amp does have plenty of power, and it really shines with some volume.

Plugging In


I tested the amp with a Nash S-63 Strat-style with Lollar pickups, a Fender Road Worn Tele and a Hamer Talledega Pro. The KR-12 excels at big, clean tones: they're warm and clear, with loads of headroom and full of nuance—they're good enough to make the amp worthy of a recommendation almost on that alone. With just a guitar plugged straight into Normal 1 and the rig set up for a slightly-pushed clean, you can easily hear the tweed-era inspiration—and you could be forgiven for guessing it was running 6L6s. The mids are warm and forward, and they pick up a thick, sweet saturation when you push it harder; the highs ring out, and there's plenty of *oomph* in the low end. The tone is balanced and very sensitive to pickup selection and touch. The Hamer's humbuckers were lush and smooth, going from mellow, woody jazz tones to fat, full and bluesy. The notched tones from the Nash were nice and quacky without being thin.

Plugging into the first Gain input and cranking up both volume knobs about two-thirds of the way, I hit a sweet spot that made me stop thinking about how good the clean tones were. When it's really working, the tweedy sound of the amp begins to give way to the more recognizably British flavor, with a distinct midrange grind, a smooth, even breakup, great dynamics that cleaned up with the guitars' volume knobs. The Hamer produced a growl and bite, and the single-coil guitars went from lean, raw tones with lots of harmonic saturation at the top to howling and thick, depending on the pickups used. The most exceptional trait of both the KR-12's clean and overdriven tones, though, is the decisively punchy attack, which it maintained with every guitar. The Tele's bridge pickup, in particular, came through with a sting and sizzle I hadn't heard from it yet, while the string definition and clarity remained.

This amp is also capable of delivering the big, blooming bass that makes for genuine old-school blues tones. I tend to prefer the low end a little tighter sounding, and I had no problem reining in low end simply by tightening the Damping control. While it may not be the best choice for bone-crunching, high-gain metal, there is enough gain on tap to pull off all but the hardest rock. I experimented with several of the

recommendations Louis offers for achieving different gain structures by using the included foot-switch or 'jumping' channel inputs with a few types of overdrive and boost pedals—a Hermida ZenDrive and Mosferatu, an Xotic BB+ booster and several BSM treble boosters. Cascading gain stages lent the amp a great crunch, sustain and harmonically rich distortion, and the particular voices of the different pedals came through without muddiness. Truth be told, though, I actually ended up spending most of my time playing the KR-12 with nothing between the guitar and amp but a 20' Elixir cable. There are lots of possibilities to try out, so you're likely to find more than one setup that suits you.

The Final Mojo

There's no mystery why Louis Rosano's amps are among the favorites of so many tone purists. The latest version of the KR-12 delivers on its promise of simplicity and true versatility, with tone to spare. These are great things to have in an amp that can establish an identity of its own in a musical environment so heavy with tradition. It stakes out a tonal territory that's not based on any single style of vintage amp, it does a lot, and it's very good at everything it does. 

Buy If...

you're looking for an ace stage amp that will deliver any of the classic tones you want from it.

Skip If...

you need lots of modern features, or you're looking for a carry-around combo.

Rating...

4.5

ON THE Web

Head online to hear sound clips of the amp in action at

premierguitar.com



Louis Electric
MSRP \$3495
louisamps.com