

REVIEW

Phil Jones Bass Six-Pak

by Robert Kaye

Portable Powerhouse Defies Convention

First impressions foretell much. Just one look at the Six-Pak, or any of Phil Jones' Bass amplification equipment for that matter, portends that the British-born engineer/musician has, in developing ways to build a better box, thought outside of it. Far, far away.

Sporting six 5-inch custom-designed "Piranha" transducers featuring high-grade strontium ferrite magnets in an extremely robust, front-ported cabinet, and powered by PJB's M-500 MOSFET amp/preamp, this combo amp may be all you ever need for sound reinforcement. The Six-Pak was designed to handle most club gigs, recording sessions and practice sessions; but truth be told, it can handle much more demanding situations.

Jones, in addition to being the brains and brawn behind Phil Jones Bass, doubles as President/Designer of an award-winning high-end audiophile firm, American Acoustic Development (www.aadsound.com). He is also a professional bassist. Hence, he's keenly knowledgeable about music, sound reinforcement, engineering, audiophile quality, bass amplification and then some. Jones' goal in creating the Six-Pak was, "...to build the ultimate bass combo amp. One that had the power, clarity and tone of a big amp head, coupled to a powerful compact speaker enclosure that allowed extensive tone shaping, along with world-class studio quality performance. It had to be capable of working with any high quality bass instrument including acoustic basses [and electrics] with piezo pickups." Jones also wanted to build a combo package that was genuinely portable, which could be transported with nominal lifting or carrying. Another key idea was that, "... the amplifier could be used for any sized gig; only additional speakers would be necessary, because the amp could generate as much as 1,000 watts peak."

Mission accomplished. The Six-Pak allows players to transport a fairly moveable combo amp to and fro, yet still be able to expand its incredible potentially high-powered output when adding (ideally Phil Jones' Piranha arrayed) extension cabs. The Six-

Pak cabinet's design and extensive bracing helps eliminate noise floor overtones, making it an ideal stand-alone studio amp as well.

The Six-Pak is a serious contender for being one of the most well built, incredible sounding, and supremely functional combos to hit the marketplace in decades. Its custom-made "Piranha" drivers are optimally aligned with a computer-aided designed vented enclosure. Each proprietary Kevlar driver is cable of handling up to 100 watts. So forget everything old school when it comes to big drivers = big sound. To paraphrase Jones in his company's attractive brochure: "...Like a heavyweight fighter, the big driver is inherently ponderous... Slow to start, even slower to stop... the cone is prone to flexing and distortion."

The theory behind PJB's Six-Pak (as well as PJ's other cabs aligned with walls of Piranhas) is that the combined surface areas, voice coils and magnets of all the individual Piranha drivers exert more control than the single motor of a mammoth-sized woofer. As the brochure states, "...by sharing the workload, each driver operates only in the optimized part of its power band where the torque is greatest. It never approaches redline where dynamic compression limits all conventional designs..." Result? They're quicker, more efficient, and more accurate harmonically. Ah, but can these silver babies accurately push the full weight of a low B-string or reproduce the delicacies of a high C-string or its upper partials? And then some! The Six-Pak's half-dozen drivers are the equivalent of 30 inches of speaker area, about the same, according to the folks at PJB, as a 12-inch driver. The magnetic field of *each* Piranha exceeds your

conventional 10-inch woofer by more than two, with 100 watts of pink noise at <0.5db compression for four hours, non-stop. Now factor in the nimble, piston-like reaction of all six Piranha's working in precision and you've exponentially raised the bar at having a high-fidelity bass amplification system that's virtually unparalleled.

One of Jones' challenges in designing/building the Six-Pak was being able to fit all its amp/preamp components into a small amplifier and to have a full range transducer that could handle the entire audio spectrum that today's basses are capable of producing with great power and finesse. "It was a challenge to fit that much power into such a complementary head," he says, pointing out that the enclosed amplifier's power rating is very conservative. "If it were made by a competitor, one would just double the wattage ratings."

The Six-Pak's M-500 built-in amp/pre-amp is a musical marvel. It's not just what's



on the outside but the inside that counts. Jones' audiophile acumen went into such details as using 2% silver-solder to thwart oxidation and employing the M500's massive, high current magnetically shielded toroidal power supply. The M-500's output is about (a conservative) 200 watts RMS into the Six-Pak's six 5-inch drivers, from 40Hz up to 15kHz. That's good & plenty for most practice sessions and average sized club jobs. For studio sessions or hooking up to a P.A., the M-500 comes with an ultra low impedance (200 ohms) XLR-direct balanced output, with pre/post EQ and ground lift switches.

What about bigger venues? Combining the Six-Pak with other Phil Jones' Piranha cabinets yields even more impressive results. Hooking up PJ's 9B extension cabinet (a computer-tuned ported enclosure with nine Piranha's) to the Six-Pak produced results that were far greater than the sum of its parts. Not only was the low B-string on a Michael Kelly 5-string acoustic/electric bass clear and articulated, but when using a syncoated rapid-fire four finger ghost note/pitch note technique, all 15 drivers were dancing along for the ride. Literally: you could see these remarkable little Piranhas hop, skip and jump in correspondence with every pluck, mute and nuance of attack. Mr. Jones is indeed on to something big by thinking little. (FYI: the 9B cab is rated at 900W maximum power at 40Hz-15kHz, at 2.8 Ohms in combo with the Six-Pak.)

Overall, the Six-Pak's sound is so articulated that you might even find yourself having a new affair with your old bass's natural sound. Add a new set of strings, new batteries (for active axes), cleaned pots and you'll be falling in love with your baby all over again.

Nonetheless, tone shaping is entirely permutable with the M-500's three-band, quasi-parametric rotary EQs used in junction with the 12-band sliding graphic EQ. Eschewing the use of pre-sets, Jones feels, gives the bassist more far choices regarding timbre. Combining the semi-P and Graphic EQs provide even the most tone-tweaking bassist with a never-ending story of sonorities.

The S-P (or S-P/9B combo) is a musical mirror with muscle. Every shade of tone, attack, timbre — both good and bad — will be readily produced. Hence, if your technique is a little on the not-so-clean side, that's what you'll hear. If your strings are dead or buzzing, you'll hear muffled or choked-off notes, correspondingly. The Six-Pak, says Jones, can improve bassists' musicianship because, "... now they actually hear

every subtle change they make in their playing technique." Quite right.

Even though Jones says the Six-Pak can deliver an astonishing 1,000 watts during peaks, admittedly, at higher volumes, there was some occasional transient distortion when executing an aggressive slapping technique on a 1972 Rickenbacker 4001. However, this may have been a function of the elderly instrument, or perhaps dependent upon the frequency boost/cut selected from the combination of the semi-parametric and graphic EQs, along with the settings of the Input Sensitivity and Master Volume controls. Kicking in the M-500's built-in compressor did help somewhat, but backing off on the P-EQ's midrange boosts and the Graphic EQ's low bass frequencies, as well as adjusting the Input Sensitivity in relation to the Master Volume, did help quell the problem somewhat.

The road-worthy Six-Pak comes cleverly equipped with heavy-duty wheels and a locking, telescopic rear airline handle that facilitates moving its near 90-pound bravado around. *Thank you!* Top rubber handles and rugged, recessed metallic side handles facilitate necessary manhandling. A fabric cover (with light padding near the top to cover the M-500) is included. (The 9B comes with heavy duty, front-locking wheels, the same hefty metal side handles and its own fabric cover).

A couple of (mostly cosmetic, albeit functional) suggestions to make the Six-Pak even more extraordinary:

- 1) In its upgrade models, PJB could darken with black ink — or even better, enlighten with built-in colored LEDs — the indented indicators on its silver rotary knobs on the M-500's semi-para-

metric EQ, Input Level Sensitivity Control, Compressor and Master Volume Controls. That would facilitate being able to determine at a glance from several feet away what levels the controls were set at. Exacerbating the issue, the instrument panel's blue lights (On/Off, P-EQ on/off and Graphic EQ on/off) are so bright that they make determining one's EQ and aforementioned settings all that more difficult to see.

Having different colored LEDs on the tips of Graphic EQ sliders could be cool looking, but not as necessary.

- 2) Also, common practice in contemporary electronics design is to turn a function "On" by flipping its switch *up*. On the M-500, this is just the opposite. While its blue lights do indicate when a function is engaged, the flip up mode might seem more intuitive, at least to we Yanks.
- 3) Jones was keen to position two of the Six-Pak's speakers directed slightly upwards towards the listener, however, some might welcome the extra ability to tilt the amp back (when not used with other cabs), like many other combo amps on the market. The challenge is what to do with its rear wheels when tilting the amp skyward. I'm certain Phil Jones' genius can devise a solution.
- 4) The Six-Pak's Owner's Manual is chockablock with information, but the verbiage is heavily slanted toward the M-500; five pages touch upon the combo package itself, with 24 pages dedicated solely to its powerful M-500 head. I'd like to see some cutaway diagrams showing the cab, perhaps some more info about its design sensibilities, suggested EQ settings, etc.

Currently, there are only nine states in the US with an official Phil Jones Bass equipment dealer. Alas, that makes hands-on auditions of these well-designed systems tough, if not impossible for most. If you're interested in obtaining the Six-Pak (or any other PJB's superlative amplification products and or its high end products/cables), start by visiting its website, www.philjonesbass.com.

Bottom line? When it comes to PJB's Six-Pak, hearing — not seeing — is believing. Close your eyes. Trust your ears.

Suggested Retail Price: \$1,995

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