

Gallien-Krueger MB800, September 2013

Over 40+ years of playing, my bass amps have run from the small (Bandmaster, Bassman, Portaflex, V4B, Carvin BX250, Gallien-Krueger MB200) all the way up to the large (pre + QSC RMX1450). Though most are gone, I've kept a few around, even a few I don't use that much, because they're so good at one particular job. A Tech21 BDDI, because of its SVT-like harmonic richness and its "bloomy" bass control; an Eden WTDI, because of that 50 Hz boost button that makes sealed bass cabs come alive at the bottom end; the BX250 because it can do just about anything within its power limits and because it sounds so great when run right past redline; a G-K Backline 600 for its classic thick-sounding preamp, its intelligent tone control scheme, and its more-than-sufficient power for almost any job; an ART SLA-2 notebook-size power amp for its tight, fast, but very solid bass and decent power without the shoulder-separating weight of a 2U sled.

The only lightweight amps I've owned in the past, or still own, are the MB200 (dead through the mass-market vendor's fault, post-warranty, and pillaged for parts), the BX250, and an Aquilar TH500 whose tone controls I've grown sick of fighting. (I use only the TH500's power amp section, and that works great for me.) I'd always wanted to try another higher-powered lightweight -- not necessarily because I needed one for the work I do, but more out of interest whether a lightweight in a higher power class and with tone controls that made sense to me could hold its own against a higher-powered sled like a G-K (700 or 1001) or a pre + sled power amp. Rather than go into the reasons I crossed other brands off my list, I'll just say that I settled on G-K because their tone fits the work I do, and their build quality and post-purchase support are up there with the best.

I was going to hop on the MB500 bandwagon along with all the others who already had. I'd searched all over and read of only one problem with an MB500. (Yeah, I know that methodology renders the result statistically meaningless, but the part of statistics that deals with human behavior tells us it's the people who have problems with a product who are the ones most likely to air them on a forum, so I'll wager the MB500 really does have a pretty good reliability record.)

But then . . . there was the MB800. The top dog of the lightweights. The really serious business. A couple hundred extra and I could have that instead of the 500. The only thing that made me hesitate was that I'd heard the tone controls had been tweaked in a way that would give me less of what my MB200 had given me. I'd always loved the 200's thick, soupy sound.

I went with the MB800 anyway. And this time I used my head and chose a top-shelf vendor: Sweetwater. I'd never dealt with an outfit like that in the past. When they got my web order, they called me to discuss the purchase, asked me what I played, and so on. Though I'd chosen the free shipping because I wasn't in any rush, the amp still showed up in only a few days.

As soon as I saw Sweetwater's packaging tape on the box, I knew I'd picked the right vendor this time. At the very least they'd opened the box and checked the unit for obvious damage. I cut the tape, folded back the flaps, and there was the candy, just like I'd heard from other Sweetwater buyers. And a thick master catalog, too. (I need to stay away from that deadly thing as long as I possibly can. You all know what I mean.)

I pulled out the head, plugged it in, and tried it first with a re-engineered/re-reported Peavey 1x15 cab with a Kappalite 3015LF. I have to laugh because I remember going a little bug-eyed and having a big grin on my face. I'd always heard that lightweights can't produce the low-end dynamics that the best sleds can. (I'm talking about the cream of the crop sleds, the forty-pounders and up, the ones with huge, tightly regulated power supplies.) Well, the MB800 crushes that notion like an engineer's hammer applied to a June bug, and leaves just as big of a mess. At the bottom end, we're talking dangerously serious power and weight combined with instantaneous speed and huge attack. An analogy would be a gorilla that can bend I-beams but that can also lunge at you ten times quicker than Bruce Lee. And I was expecting this would be only an MB200 on steroids?

Nope, this is a whole 'nother class of amp. The MB800 takes you into a realm of

power and performance that leaves the lesser-rated lightweights in an embarrassing second place.

Next up was a pair of Avatar B212 neo cabs. In a word: Ridiculous. The only previous setup that had really let me hear what those cabs could do was my RMX1450 (260+260, 8 ohms per side) driven with a WTDI. Frankly, the MB800 ate the RMX's lunch and popped the bag. Again, it was all about dynamics. This amp sounds ridiculously fast and muscular, no matter the volume.

Now, about the tone. Yes, the MB800 does sound like its tone controls and/or the biasing scheme in the front end have gone to a "Revision B," because the 800 sounds a lot cleaner by default than my MB200 did and my Backline 600 does. I'm not talking sterile, like my BX250 with its drive control at 0, just absent that inescapable preamp-induced thickness the MB200, and even the Backline 600 to a somewhat lesser degree, are known for. Do I miss it? Honestly, I'm on the fence, leaning slightly toward yes, but by only by an amount you'd need a protractor to measure. In the real world -- in a mix -- the difference would be zero, and I mean dead zero. And remember, the preamp can still be overdriven. To repeat, I'm talking about default behavior, not what the amp can be made to do.

Fans? There are two, side by side. Yep, they're loud. But so what -- this isn't an amp that belongs in a studio; it's an FOH Destroyer Of First Rows. I did notice the fans fire up sooner than they did on my MB200. I'm in a 70 degree F room as I'm writing this. The 800 is sitting behind me idle, and its fans are cycling every ten minutes or so. My MB200's fan never kicked on until the room was 80-85 F. Makes sense, though; 800 watts in a tiny aluminum case is going to need help staying running, and somewhat aggressively. This is one amp whose fan functionality you'll never have to ask about on a forum. That question popped up multiple times for the 200, not because there's anything wrong with its fan scheme, but because the aluminum case is so good keeping the amp cool all on its own.

I'd make only one change: I'd swap the locations of the pad and mute switches. That's because there's almost no friction to the channel gain knobs, so if you're not vigilant, Channel A can be knocked off setting when going after the mute.

Haven't tried the DI because I always use a Radial JDI out to the board. Also haven't done a hiss test because my style isn't slap or anything else that requires much above, say, 500-600 Hz. I still have to check all the rear-mounted jacks for functionality, too. So, still a bit to do. In the meantime, I hope this review helps folks who are considering a top-shelf lightweight bass amp.

Nine out of ten. One ding for the location of the mute switch. No ding for the default "anti-MB200" clarity, because that's only a matter of taste.

Highly recommended. Another great job, Bob Gallien. Thank you. And thank you, too, Sweetwater. You're my vendor from here on out.

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