



GEAR REVIEW

SHAPE SHIFTER The Milbert Amplifiers GAGA D-60

Gear reviews, whether describing guitars or amps, often speak to the versatility of the equipment in question. While some gear tabbed as "versatile" may be capable of several tasks when in the right hands, few pieces can be reasonably expected to be jacks of all trades. Milbert Amplifiers' GAGA is possibly the exception that proves this rule. Lightweight and featuring an innovative transformerless design, GAGA – available in 30-, 60- and 90-watt configurations – may even be unparalleled in matching versatility with satisfying tube tone.

Under its hood of aircraft aluminum, GAGA D-60 accommodates any tubes, auto-matches impedance to any speaker, adjusts headroom, and provides phantom power for pedals. Milbert designers are coy about how GAGA steps voltage up and down without a transformer (schematics can be found online), but players only need to know that a transformerless amp allows pure, unfiltered tube response.

GAGA lets guitarists use any common power tubes in any combination of two, three, or four. Thanks to auto bias, even mismatched tubes can be used to shape tone (the amp ships with four 6L6s). The GAGA's stock 12AX7 and 12AT7 preamp tubes can also be swapped out.

The chassis' distinctive face features a 10-step headroom dial (H) that controls total output power in a range from around 1

watt up to 60 watts, with lower headroom settings enabling tube overdrive at lower volume (V). The treble (T) and bass (B) are highly responsive to the tube complement and to the gain (G) setting.

For additional frequency adjustment, the three-way Flip toggle can be set to bright, brighter, or flat. Beneath it, the Loop bat applies signal to the input jack or to the rear-panel return, while its middle position provides a mute; because GAGA idles at low current, there's no need for a standby. The Power toggle at far left indicates "on" with a green lamp. Next to it are a red lamp and button for P3 phantom power, which supplies power to the ring terminal of a TRS cable. With P3 engaged and a splitter to distribute power, GAGA effectively does away with the external power supplies and power strips needed to juice 9-volt pedals.

Without a transformer to drive, the distinctive qualities of different output tubes are heard unimpeded. And because tubes can be easily swapped after pulling off GAGA's top, the amp provides a singular opportunity to explore truly pure tube sounds.

Testing ex-

Price: \$2,950 (list)
Info: www.milbert.com/gaga

hausted just a handful of the hundreds of possible combinations.

First up were two EL34s. Playing a Tele on the neck pickup with the headroom low and the V and G controls each around 11 o'clock yielded a cozy archtop jazz sound. Low-end notes were beautifully defined and required no shaping with treble or bass controls. The broad midrange sound allowed closely voiced chords to bloom and fattened up single-note leads. With the guitar volume dimed, dropping the volume and pushing the gain completely changed scenes to a meaty midrange drive, not unlike the Marshall sound for which EL34s are known. A ringing power chord thrilled with the duration of its sustain and charmed with the upper harmonics at its tail end.

With the same settings, one EL34 was replaced with a 6L6. The resulting overdriven sound had more teeth and was more tightly in the upper midrange – a powerful, hard-rock tone with the drive of a British amp and the crispness of the California sound. Cleaning it up by dialing the gain back down and the headroom and volume up yielded a warm yet airy sound. After adding a second 6L6, the tone was sparkly with the mids scooped, something like a Twin but with a roundness and harmonic richness afforded by the lone EL34.

Any speaker cab or cab pair can be connected to GAGA, regardless of load, though for a perfect match of versatility and style, Milbert's own 1x12" cabinet is loaded with a 100-watt Jensen Jet Tornado, weighs under 30 pounds, and has moveable back panels. The GAGA head docks to the low-weight cab, allowing for an easy one-grip trip to the car.

GAGA could feasibly mimic most any tube amp. But well beyond the amp's capacity for emulation is an opportunity to discover entirely new timbres and perhaps nail a sound that otherwise exists only in a player's mind. Though the price tag will narrow its user base, touring musicians, session players, recording studios, and tone hounds may find GAGA irresistible. –
Rich Maloof

