

PHIL JONES BASS Briefcase



List price: \$599; approx. street price: NA

Pros: Excellent portability; clean, dry tone; battery power.

Cons: Battery not included; expensive.

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**BY
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Few technological realms boast citizens as passionate and demanding as the audiophile stereo world. Buyers and builders alike pour thousands of dollars and hours into their irreplaceable quest for perfect sound. Phil Jones of Phil Jones Bass is a major figure in that world, and that's one reason why his entrance into our nook of the audio market is exciting. Jones's buzz is also accentuated by his exotic-looking cabinets, which exclusively contain bright-silver, custom-designed 5" speakers. PJB offers an array of amps and cabinets, but perhaps its biggest buzz generator is the portable Briefcase, which combines an optional 12-volt battery with a miniature 100-watt amp and 2x5 cabinet. Phil Jones designed the Briefcase to be a high-fidelity amp that could be used for low-volume music anywhere.

First things first. No, those silver drivers aren't aluminum-coned; the silver is actually paint, which PJB uses for purely aesthetic pur-

poses. It's just one charming touch among many on the Briefcase. Because of Phil Jones's large, well-appointed Chinese production facility, which also manufactures equipment for numerous high-end audiophile companies, PJB is able to build custom parts instead of using off-the-shelf components. The result is high design continuity; each component seems well suited to its task and exudes a high-quality feel.

The Briefcase's construction is excellent, particularly considering the diminutive box's density. Stuffing a battery, amp, speakers, and wiring into such a small package is a feat, and thanks to nifty engineering, the PJB does it with elegance. To remove the amp section, I unscrewed four anchor bolts, allowing the thin-but-long head to slide out. The amp's interior is densely packed, with a fan-cooled heatsink dividing the pre-amp components from the power supply at the rear. Since the amp's chassis is closed, a removable handle on the amp section (so the amp could be used away from the cabinet) would be a cool addition.

The PJB's front panel is small, with the bulk of the space gobbled by a 5-band graphic EQ. The onboard compressor operates at a preset 3:1 ratio, with the COMPRESSION knob providing threshold control. A blue LED illuminates when the compressor is active. The ACTIVE/PASSIVE switch offers the appropriate sensitivity and input impedance for active and passive basses—a cool feature, considering some active/passive inputs only offer sensitivity adjustment.

The Briefcase's rear-panel outputs include 1/4" PRE-AMP OUT and

SPEAKER jacks and an XLR BALANCED LINE OUT. For battery operation, you must connect two binding posts to a matching pair located below the amp section with included jumpers. The battery itself is installed via an aluminum panel on the cabinet's base. Phil Jones Bass does not provide a battery, but the owner's manual includes extensive information regarding the required type as well as a list of retailers and compatible models. I'd prefer if the battery were included with the amp, but the required 12-volt lead-acid type is inexpensive, averaging between \$10 and \$25, depending on the retailer. [Phil Jones Bass responds: "Including the battery substantially increases shipping costs due to the increased weight and the lead-acid type's status as a hazardous material. Some players may not even need the battery."] Once installed, the battery is connected to internal wires via fast-on connectors. The manual also includes information about optimum battery maintenance, and PJB includes a cable for charging the battery via a back-panel jack. On average, the battery lasts about one hour of normal use. For longer AC-free gigs, PJB recommends using an external heavy-duty car battery, which would make the Briefcase a lot less portable.

Take Out

The handy Briefcase begs to be grabbed-and-gone, and that's just what I did, taking it on several quiet rehearsals and a mellow art-gallery gig. I used several basses, including an F Bass BN5 and a Sadowsky Metro 4J (see page 54). I also tried it in my home studio with a pre-war German upright. With the electrics, I appreciated the Briefcase's clear and sparkling tone. It's low-end extension is admirable for a 2x5 cabinet, but it can't provide huge bass response, though placing it in a room corner can help accentuate the low end. What the PJB lacks in bottom it makes up for with striking quickness and punch. Its tone is essentially clean and direct-sounding, without any additive warmth or crunch-

iness. Whereas with bigger amps an onboard compressor is sometimes an unnecessary addition, I found that the Briefcase's tone greatly benefits from its compression circuit—I could tame headroom-snapping transients without sacrificing overall tone. The compressor came in handy particularly when I played 5-string, preventing the *B* string from overtaxing the drivers. The PJB's volume would be adequate for small gigs and rehearsals. The rear-panel extension speaker jack is welcome, but since the internal cabinet is rated at 4Ω impedance and the PJB's minimum recommended load is 3Ω, you'll likely want to disconnect the internal speaker and use one larger extension cabinet—another reason why a separate amp handle would be cool.

The Briefcases' thoughtfully voiced 5-band graphic EQ offers good tone sculpting, but I think the addition of broad-spectrum shelving bass and treble controls would perhaps be more helpful. With the lower bands, a judicious touch is important, as the 18dB of available boost sacrifice headroom and detract from the PJB's pliable, sensitive personality. With the upright, the Briefcase did exactly what I desired: It enhanced my volume without detracting from the woody richness of the bass's acoustic tone. The DI output worked fine in my home studio, but I would have liked to see a ground lift and pre/post switch. Without an external 12-volt battery, the Briefcase's battery life was as advertised, clocking in at approximately one hour of normal use—a little short for use as a busking amp. Charging it was a snap, but I'd appreciate a light indicating when the charge is complete. Phil Jones recommends an initial charging time of six to eight hours; after that, the battery charges each time the amp is plugged into an AC outlet.

The Phil Jones Bass Briefcase is unlike any bass product I've encountered. There are comparably priced, more powerful amps with a bit more flexibility out there, but in terms of portability and sheer niftiness, the Briefcase is the one to beat.

BP

Power rating: 100 watts RMS into 4Ω
Input impedance: 4MΩ passive; 100kΩ active
Tone controls: (All ±18dB) 50Hz; 160Hz; 630Hz; 2.5kHz; 10kHz
XLR DI output: Differential op-amp driven
Speakers: Proprietary PJB
Dimensions: 6½" x 14½" x 15¾"
Weight: 28 lbs (approx. 34 lbs w/battery)

Made in: China

Warranty: Two years limited



The Briefcase's interior is a model of space efficiency. Note the heatsink tunnel and fan, which separates the sensitive preamp components from the power supply at the rear.



The Briefcase's optional battery fits into the amp's base.