

# Mark Bass



## TA503 HEAD & STANDARD 104HF CABINET



Set up by Marco De Virgiliis, Mark Bass are an Italian company that we first looked at, and were very impressed by, in the November/December 2004 issue of BGM. 2005 sees a whole new range for Mark Bass, along with glowing endorsement from bass icon Jeff Berlin and a very distinctive new colour scheme. The aim is to increase their profile in the bass community and spread the gospel, according to Mark, of the bass variety.

The philosophy behind the design and construction of Mark Bass equipment is very clear; to provide top-quality gear that meets the needs of professional bass players everywhere. To meet these needs they have made the amps and speakers as compact and lightweight as possible, and the amplifier circuitry is "designed specifically not to colour the sound of the bass, but to faithfully reproduce the unique tonal qualities of whatever instrument is played through it". To me this is an admirable mission statement and Jeff Berlin says that this is the best bass amp he's ever played through, so let's see how it shapes up.

only 8.16lbs. The next thing to say, which is made even more impressive by the first statement, is how momentarily loud it is. I used the amp on some reasonably loud gigs and never had the volume past 9 o'clock, which is just past the first of six markers on the master volume knob. Now we all know that most of the volume increase is at the start of the sweep, but honestly, turning the master to half way resulted in earth-shaking bass that at the very least could loosen a few fillings! Raw power without control is of no use to anyone so it's good to know that the TA503 isn't short of control and tone shaping capability.

On the front panel the TA503 has *Passive* and *Active* 1/4" jack inputs, and an input *Gain* control that has a blue LED to indicate peaking. There is a *Line Out* level control that regulates the output of the rear line out XLR and another blue *Mute* LED that can only be activated via the optional footswitch.

The EQ section takes the form of four level and four frequency selector controls described as *Low*, *Mid Frequency Low*, *Mid Frequency High* and *High*. The top row takes care of the level of the selected frequency with up to 16dB of boost or cut, and the bottom row is where you can fine-tune at what frequency the cut or boost is applied. Each band has a very useful, wide range that overlaps a little with the adjacent control, giving you a great deal of flexibility and many tonal possibilities.

The owner's manual that comes with the TA503 is very clear on the use of EQ and its advice is in keeping with the overall construction and design

### SPECIFICATIONS MARK BASS TA503 HEAD

**Price:** £985  
**Made in:** Italy  
**Power Output:** 300-watts RMS @ 8ohms, 500-watts RMS @ 4ohms  
**Preamp Type:** Tube (1 x ECC81, 1 x ECC83)  
**Output Stage:** Solid-state  
**Dimensions:** 37cm x 8.5cm (2U) x 30.2 cm  
**Weight:** 3.7kg (8.16lbs)

### SPECIFICATIONS MARK BASS STANDARD 104HF CAB

**Price:** £751  
**Speaker Config:** 4x10" neodymium speakers, 1 x 1" compression driver with custom horn  
**Power Handling:** 800-watts RMS  
**Frequency Response:** 35Hz to 20kHz  
**Dimensions:** 59.4cm x 73.9cm x 48cm  
**Weight:** 29.9kg (65.92lbs)

### TA503 Head

The TA503 is the highest spec'd amp Mark Bass offer and has four bands of semi-parametric EQ, whereas other amps in the range only have two parametric bands that control high and low mid. There are two valves in the input stage and a power amp that delivers 500-watts into 4 ohms, or 300-watts into 8 ohms.

The very first thing to say about this amp is how unbelievably light it is - it weighs



philosophy. As the amplifier is designed to faithfully reproduce the natural sound of your bass, and providing you have a good instrument, very little EQ should be required. The EQ should only really come into play if the signal from your bass is lacking, the acoustics of the room you are in are poor, or you are after a specific musical effect. Under these conditions the Mark Bass head performs excellently. Every bass I played sounded full, clear and just as it should. Having four parametric EQ bands made it very easy to apply any EQ that was required, either to combat dodgy acoustics or pep up the sound a bit.

The other tone shaping facilities take the form of the VLE and VPF filters, which each have a single control knob on the right of the front panel. VLE stands for Vintage Loudspeaker Emulator, which reduces the top-end as you turn it clockwise. This acts a bit like a tone control on a bass and essentially makes the amp sound less 'modern'. VPF stands for Variable Pre-shape Filter which boosts lows and highs, whilst cutting mids. The effect is more dramatic the higher you have this set and it gives you a sound normally associated with rock or slap playing.

Sometimes, having all that parametric EQ can be a bit daunting and hard to tweak quickly between songs, so having these two 'quick-fix' knobs is a great idea and I found them both really effective. I especially liked the VLE circuit, as it functioned exactly as described and made my P-bass sit with my soul/R&B band really well. Personally I had less call for the VPF filter but I could see others finding it an asset. For further clarification

there are some really useful graphs in the owner's manual that show exactly how these controls affect the sound.

On the rear panel there is the usual power connection, two speaker outs in the form of speakon combo jacks that rather cleverly can accept either speakon leads or 1/4" jacks, *Effects Send* and *Return*, *Tuner Out* and an XLR *Line Out*, with *Pre/Post EQ* and *Ground Lift* switches. Back at the front there is also the connection for the optional footswitch that would give you the facility to mute the amp's output, and bypass the EQ and filter settings. This is my only gripe really, that Mark Bass should have included switches on the amp that also gave you these functions, instead of them only being accessible via the footswitch that is an optional extra.

## Standard 104HF Cabinet

The bold yellow colour scheme is taken to a whole new level with the Mark Bass speaker cabinets. Having yellow speakers will get you noticed, but I had trouble finding anyone who thought they looked good, myself included! The sound they produce is obviously much more important, but I couldn't help thinking that it made them look cheap and like they'd be more at home at a children's nursery, alongside Lego bricks and Tonka trucks!

Aesthetics aside, the Mark Bass speaker cabinets continue the lightweight philosophy, using neodymium speaker cones that are produced by B&C Speakers in collaboration with Mark Bass. The range covers the very small 1x15" cabs to a giant 6x10", and they

all include a 1" high frequency compression driver and horn with its own side-mounted level control.

The Standard 104HF cabinet is a 4x10" cabinet that is front ported at both the top and bottom. Having these ports at the front does make this cabinet quite tall, and it is also quite deep, so the sheer physical size of the unit makes it a two-man lift, even though it is surprisingly lightweight. They also do a rear-ported version that would be slightly smaller and more manageable - the 104HR. Plugged in, the 104HF sounds clear and refined with plenty of range and it had no problem in coping with all the power that the TA503 can dish out. I used it in a couple of venues where the acoustics weren't great, but at all times I could be felt and heard clearly, without being boomy and indistinct. There's plenty of top-end sizzle and clarity on offer if that's your thing, yet a vintage warmth was easy to attain, especially with the aid of the VLE circuit.

Despite being initially put off by the look, I really grew to like this rig and everyone who heard it was impressed. Mark Bass have set out their goals very clearly and I think they've done a fine job at achieving them. The head really is super-light and super-powerful and is definitely the way that a lot of bass amplification is heading. That used to mean a compromise in sound quality, but not any more, and Mark Bass are at the front of the race. Combine the head with one of the speaker cabinets from the range that suits you, and you're sure to have a sound that always hits the mark!

Andrew McKinney

## RATINGS

EACH SECTION IS RATED OUT OF 20

**BUILD QUALITY** **19**  
Excellent throughout. Everything is well designed and put together to ensure quality of sound, durability and rattle-free operation.

**SOUND** **20**  
Great sound and really powerful EQ. The VLE and VPF are very musical, easy to use and get results quickly.

**FEATURES** **18**  
Everything you could ask from a bass amp more than catered for. Only minor niggle was the mute and bypass functions only being accessible via the optional extra footswitch.

**VALUE** **18**  
A fair price for professional quality gear of this standard.

**WOW FACTOR** **19**  
There is no doubt that the yellow colour scheme will get you noticed. I'm sure that once we get to hear how good they sound it will be more reassuring to be standing in front of those yellow speakers.

**TOTAL** **94**  
This new range represents a good step forward for Mark Bass and hopefully we'll be seeing a lot more of them around.

