



# Black Magic Box

Hughes & Kettner hits the floor with its latest amp, which combines digital control of analogue solid-state. A new benchmark? We plug in to find out...

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# HUGHES & KETTNER BLACK SPIRIT 200 FLOOR £899

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As well as full MIDI compatibility (above), the Floor has an exclusive balanced monitor/aux in with its own mix control

## What You Need To Know

- Another digital modeller?**  
 No, this is a new floorboard version of the Black Spirit 200 head, essentially a rework of the valve-powered GrandMeister Deluxe on a solid-state platform. It combines that head with an integrated FSM-432 MIDI controller.
- Interesting. Does it make the tea for you as well?**  
 Ha, nearly. It centres around a four-channel preamp that uses H&K's Bionic Spirit Tone Generator technology. There are high-quality digital effects, 200 watts of Class D power, Red Box cabinet simulator, three effects loops, Bluetooth control...
- Is this the future?**  
 While many of us will never leave our head/cab or combo setups, these one-stop floorboards that can be hooked up to a PA or backline monitor/speaker are changing the way we create live sound.

**H**ughes & Kettner's hugely successful TubeMeister range was topped a couple of years ago with the GrandMeister Deluxe 40 head, which added full digital control together with built-in effects and more. At the time, we wondered if there was anywhere left to go, but we weren't kept waiting for long before Hughes & Kettner introduced the Black Spirit 200 head, essentially a rework of the valve-powered GrandMeister Deluxe on a solid-state platform. The Black Spirit 200 brought stunning analogue tone from Hughes & Kettner's breakthrough Spirit Tone Generator circuit, not to mention greater portability and consistent night-after-night performance. Now Hughes & Kettner has added a new floor version that combines the head with an integrated FSM-432 MIDI controller, and called it, unsurprisingly, the Black Spirit 200 Floor.

Because of its similarity to other modellers and multi-effects floor boards, it's important to point out the Black Spirit 200 Floor is neither of these things. It has a digitally controlled analogue solid-state preamp that Hughes & Kettner calls the Bionic Spirit Tone Generator, featuring four

channels – Clean, Crunch, Lead and Ultra. This preamp is teamed with high-quality onboard digital effects and a Class D output stage producing a whopping 200 watts into a pair of speaker outlets, with switchable attenuation down to 20 and two watts. There's also an integrated Red Box cabinet simulator with eight selectable cabinet types, two 'pre' effects loops that sit in front of the main preamp signal shaping, and one regular series effects loop.

Bluetooth lets you stream audio to the Black Spirit and control everything remotely from a mobile app, with 128 slots to save things to. Foot control comes from an integrated version of H&K's FSM-432 MkIII MIDI board, which has seven button switches and operates in three different modes: Preset mode lets you access all 128 patches in 32 banks of four, ideal for Top 40 players who can put a song in each bank; Stompbox mode uses each button to access channels, boost and effects; and a new Direct 7 mode lets you assign a favourite patch to each button for instant recall.

The black painted die-cast aluminium housing feels substantially tough; it's very portable but heavy enough to stay where it's put. Hughes & Kettner's trademark blue backlighting surrounds all the controls, which are much easier to use than they may appear at first glance. The channel selector decides the basic voice setting, followed by conventional gain, volume and EQ controls. A programmable boost option – configured differently for each channel – adds extra gain and dynamics. There's an intelligent dual breakpoint noise gate and the Black Spirit's innovative 'sag' control, which emulates the squishy dynamics of a valve power amp being driven hard, in eight progressive stages.

Pressing the FX Access button puts the amp controls into effects editing mode, with a choice of chorus, flanger, phaser or tremolo combined with delay and reverb, while the sag control changes to access the Red Box's different cabinet emulations.



The Black Spirit 200 Floor has an integrated FSM-432 MkIII MIDI controller, which can work in Preset, Stompbox or Direct 7 (your seven favourite presets) modes



The trademark blue backlighting makes the Black Spirit's controls easy to view on a dim stage, as well as looking pretty darned cool



Exclusive to the Floor version of the Black Spirit 200 are two programmable 'Pre' FX loops, which sit after the input but before the preamp gain, perfect for wahs and compressors

Finally, there are master controls for presence and resonance, together with a global master volume. Presence and resonance can be configured to act either as global EQs or with their position saved as part of a patch; the master volume is the only non-programmable control.

Other features include a cabinet EQ switch that provides a flat sound for regular guitar cabs, or Red Box emulation for passive full-range speakers. There's also a headphones/line out, full MIDI and a monitor/aux input with its own level control. The Bluetooth remote app essentially mirrors the real controls and doesn't unlock any hidden functions. It currently works on iPads and Android tablets but not iPhones, which is something we think H&K really needs to address, especially as iOS is being split into two versions. Another annoyance is the lack of a DC outlet to power stompboxes.

You'll find one on the standard FSM-432 foot controller, but here, with three loops conveniently on the floor right where your pedals would be, there's no power for them.

### Sounds

While the Black Spirit 200 Floor isn't a modelling amplifier, its core tones are deep and wide enough to cover practically every musical genre, from country and jazz to thrash metal. The Clean channel's EQ can make it fat and tweedy, with a touch of slapback delay for great rockabilly stuff, or you can scoop out some of the mids for a more contemporary shimmer topped off with a dash of chorus. The Crunch channel ups the gain for great classic rock and blues styles, with the Lead channel adding more gain and attack, while the Ultra channel is where you'll find all the compressed, liquid sustain tones favoured by many modern rock players.



### THE RIVALS

The award-winning Amp1 (£699) from Thomas Blug's BluGuitar is a flexible four-channel powered floorboard that includes a miniature valve as part of its all-analogue preamp. Power comes from a punchy 100-watt output stage. The optional accessories make this one of the most versatile powered floorboards out there.

If you already have a pedalboard looking for power, Seymour Duncan's Power Stage 170 (£329) is an amazingly compact head with 170 watts of guitar-friendly power to drive your choice of cabinets. Small enough to fit on most 'boards, it has a large master volume knob that can be turned with your foot.

For those on a budget, look no further than Hotone's Mojo Attack Nano Legacy 75W Dual Floor Amp (£199), which combines Tweed-voiced rhythm with rectifier-inspired lead channels. It has built-in digital reverb and a footswitchable boost, plus a 75-watt power stage to drive your cab. A lot of amp for the money.





The quality of the overdrives is superb. Hughes & Kettner has always been among the best when it comes to solid-state amps, going right back to the Attax series from two decades ago. Since then things have moved on in leaps and bounds. The crucial lower gain 'nearly clean' tones come alive when tweaked with the sag control, adding tactile and responsive dynamics that flatter each guitar's character.

The Black Spirit's onboard effects are very usable. It's the same chorus/flange/phaser/tremolo combination you'll find on most of the competition – so no real surprises. Nevertheless, they're decent quality and, of course, there are three separately programmable loops for your favourite stompboxes as well. The Red Box offers eight different cab simulations with a proper balanced output, adding great flexibility for connecting to live or recording consoles. Now in its fifth generation, the standalone Red Box is a de facto standard for direct recording and many working players have one in their gigbag. Adding this feature to the Black Spirit 200 greatly increases its usefulness for stage and studio, saving setup time and improving separation.

### Verdict

Valves or 'tubes' are used in most classic guitar amps from the 1950s to the present day, so they're usually behind the great tones that we've come to love. However, current mass-produced valves aren't as reliable or consistent as their 50s counterparts, making it increasingly difficult and expensive to keep a valve

H&K's Floor condenses amps, flight cases, cables and pedals into a chocolate box-sized package you can lift with one finger

amp running in peak condition. Digital modelling continues to advance along its own path. Meanwhile, we think the Black Spirit 200 range has truly raised the bar for solid-state tone, combining fat analogue sounds with modern Class D output stages to achieve portable power that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

The new Floor version here adds most of the functionality of the head version, plus the FSM-432 MIDI controller, with a few cool extras at a modest saving, making it great value for money.

Back in the 1970s, the standard rig for many pro touring guitarists would have been a 100-watt British head and 4x12, plus a 100-watt American or Japanese 2x12 combo for clean sounds, together with flight cases, cables and pedals. Hughes & Kettner's Black Spirit 200 Floor condenses all of that and more into a chocolate box-sized package you can lift with one finger, not to mention the sort of reliability and night-after-night consistency that most valve competitors can't match. For working players who are looking for a credible alternative to valves, Hughes & Kettner's Black Spirit 200 Floor is a pretty compelling choice – what's not to like? **G**



## HUGHES & KETTNER BLACK SPIRIT 200 FLOOR HEAD

**PRICE:** £899

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** Analogue solid-state preamp with fully programmable digital control and effects, Class D power amp  
**OUTPUT:** 200W (switchable to 20W and 2W)

**VALVES:** None

**DIMENSIONS:** 70 (h) x 470 (w) x 255mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 4/9

**HOUSING:** Die-cast aluminium

**CHANNELS:** 4 selectable voices, with programmable boost

**CONTROLS:** Channel select, gain, volume, bass, mid and treble. Noise gate, sagging, resonance, presence, master volume. Pre loop select x2, boost select, fx access, loop select, store preset, monitor in level, cab type select, output power select, Red Box on/off, line/mic select, foot controller mode select, MIDI in, out/thru

**FOOTSWITCH:** Integrated FSM-432 MkIII 7-button MIDI controller with 3 modes: Preset, Stompbox or Direct 7

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Integral digital effects (modulation/delay/reverb), noise gate, sagging control, integral Red Box with eight cabinet types, 2 'pre' effects loops, 1 series effects loop, balanced monitor input with level mix, headphones/line out, aux in. Bluetooth audio streaming and remote control via app

**OPTIONS:** Padded carry bag (£59)

**RANGE EXPANSION:** The head version is £769, with a separate FSM-432 MIDI foot controller at £159. The Black Spirit 200 1x12" combo with special ported cabinet is £1,299



**PROS** Great looks; tough, ultra-lightweight casing; huge versatility and superb tone; the sag control adds real valve-like dynamics

**CONS** Remote app support really needs attention; the standalone FS-432's DC power outlet is missing