



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMANDA THOMAS

# Emerson Williams Bluestone Pro Load Box **£98.70**

Tame that stack the Bluestone way and put great tone back into your recordings *by Nick Guppy*

**L**ike many things in life, recording the electric guitar is something that's easy to do, but difficult to do well. A valve amplifier has a very big dynamic range (the gap between the loudest and quietest notes you can play), and squeezing all the power of a big amp with a 4 x 12 cabinet into the standard 16-bit digital format means much of that range is lost. This is why digital modelling amplifiers and preamps work so well direct-to-tape or disk, but sometimes sound a little flat when used live: their dynamic range is already compressed. It's made more difficult for valve amp users because most valve amps are designed to sound at their best when cranked up to live concert volume levels. This is no problem if you're recording in a proper

studio, but for most of us the 'studio' is a converted garage or bedroom in close proximity to other people, so recording means balancing your volume levels against the number of complaints you're likely to get.

One solution is to use a load box or power attenuator. In simple terms, these are heavy-duty volume controls that sit between your amp and loudspeaker. However, the relationship between valves, output transformers and loudspeakers is a complex one, and while you can replace a loudspeaker with a high power resistor of the correct value, the resistor won't really behave like a loudspeaker.

It's clever electronics to the rescue then. This time in the shape of the Bluestone Pro from

Emerson Williams: a load box that claims to retain true amp tone and dynamics, as well as offering all the inputs and outputs a modern guitarist needs.

## The Rivals

Andy Marshall's award-winning **THD Hotplate** (£249.99) is the Rolls-Royce of attenuators. Available in all impedances, including oddball ones, it also has an adjustable line-out, tone controls and a passive noise reduction circuit. **Marshall's Powerbrake** (£219.99) is another industry standard, with a wide range of attenuation, high power handling and switchable impedance. But it lacks desk or cabinet emulation.



The aluminium compact casing houses all the inputs and outputs a guitarist needs



The level control allows adjustable attenuation to suit the output device

Small (roughly the same size as a large packet of cigarettes), neat and constructed from quality components housed in a robust aluminium box, the Bluestone Pro plugs between your amp's output and loudspeakers. A small toggle switch lets you switch the device in or out. When it's out everything behaves as though the box wasn't there, but flip the switch in the other direction and the loudspeaker is disconnected. Now the amp's output is connected to the Bluestone's internal load, and from the Bluestone you can connect to a desk or listen through headphones, adjusting volume levels to suit, directly from an attenuator control on the load box. The Bluestone also has a separate 3.5mm audio input so you can connect a personal stereo and load up your favourite band or backing tracks to play along with. For connecting to a mixing desk, the Pro version also features a proper balanced output on a 3-pin XLR, with a ground-lift switch. To protect your amp and speakers, the Bluestone includes an overload warning light and is

designed to automatically connect to the internal load if the speaker is disconnected.

**In Use**

We tried the Bluestone Pro with a Rivera Quiana Studio 112 combo, with the direct line output patched to a Mackie 1604 desk with Yamaha NS10 nearfields and a Marantz power amp – a common home studio setup that works well for low-volume monitoring. Using the Bluestone's switch, it is very easy to A/B between the amp's direct tone and that of the load box through the NS10's. The Bluestone comes with a very useful data sheet that details desk EQ settings for many popular amps, and armed with this it only takes a few minutes to dial in a perfect direct-to-desk match for the Quiana. The resulting recorded sound is crisp, detailed and remarkably similar to what would normally take hours of fiddling with mic types and placement to achieve. Neither the amp nor the Bluestone suffer any problems during an entire day of continuous use.

**Verdict**

Load boxes answer many of the problems associated with getting a good amplified guitar tone directly onto tape or disk. The Bluestone offers a simple, hassle-free route to great recorded tone for any player who wants to use their favourite valve amp in the studio. It may not have all the bells and whistles of some of its competitors, but that's reflected in the price, which we think is more than reasonable. For any player who does a lot of recording or live work where going through a PA is the norm, having one of these in your gig bag is a no-brainer. **G**

**The bottom line**

**We like:** A simple, easy to use design that works well and is great value for money  
**We dislike:** Currently only available in one impedance – 8 ohms  
**Guitarist says:** If you want to get great recorded tone then it's definitely worth trying out.



**Emerson Williams Bluestone Pro Load Box**

**PRICE:** £98.70  
**POWER HANDLING:** 75 watts continuous, 150 watts peak  
**AMPLIFIER IMPEDANCE:** 8 ohms only  
**INPUTS:** 6.35mm mono jack, 3.5mm stereo jack  
**OUTPUTS:** 6.35mm mono jack for speaker and headphones, balanced XLR with ground-lift switch  
**OTHER FEATURES:** Variable output level control, overload warning light  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Bluestone Classic does away with the balanced output and costs £59.99. The Bluestone Live (price TBA) is an unloaded version that will do away with the headphone option but allow the speaker and DI outputs to work simultaneously and there's also a bass version in the pipeline  
**Emerson Williams** 01383 851133  
[www.emersonwilliams.com](http://www.emersonwilliams.com)

**Test results**

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★

