

## PRODUCT: MarkBass SA 450 Head & 800 watt 104HR Cab

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The guys at Australian Musician Magazine have asked me to have a look at the Markbass range of amps from Italy, and this is what I found ... Markbass is the product of one Marco De Virgiliis, an Italian amp maker who is starting to make waves on the international Bass scene. The rig I was given to try was the SA 450 head and a 800 watt Standard 104HR 4 x 10" cab.

The first thing that hits you even before you unpack the head is its incredibly light weight ... at only 3.6 kilos its one of the neatest little packages I've ever seen. They keep the weight down by use of the Markbass Digital Power Supply Circuitry , which does away with the need for a heavy power transformer. The whole head itself is small and easy to handle which is a long overdue change from the norm.

On unpacking the rig and setting up, the striking yellow and black colours are the first thing that catch the eye. Then you take in the simplicity of the layout – starting from the left you have the input jack followed by the Gain control. This exhibits a nice amount of headroom in use, meaning that it is sensitive but not too quick to break up when leaning on the lower strings of the bass. Next is the Line Out Level, sensibly on the front panel. The Bass Control is next, and at flat exhibits a nice amount of warmth and solidity without being mushy at all. Boosting it brings a smooth increase until you have an absolute wall of rich sweetness, perfect for your sub-dub and reggae styles. Cutting it from flat dries it out completely without giving any harshness to the sound. Taking this to extremes and boosting it all the way, as well as giving the Ken Smith 6 string bass I was testing it with full bass boost on the active tone circuit, it was still hard to get the amp or cab to crack up, no mean feat at all and

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particularly clever in view of the whole rigs size and weight. The next is the Mid Low control and it has both a level and a frequency sweep control that enable you to dial in just the right amount of punch to the sound without breaking up when pushed, while moving the control into cut produces anywhere from a hint of sweetness to a total lack of punch in the tone at all ... the mark of a good midrange control. The frequency select is smooth and even, and drops well into the low frequencies as well as the entire range of low mid-range punch area, so it is very useable indeed. The Mid Highs follow the same pattern, level and frequency select , and exhibit a range from honky and nasal to sweet air in the upper register. Treble is sweet and open and won't go " clanky " on you no matter how hard you push, even the slapping style. I think the most important point here is that the mid-range is extremely flexible in both adding and subtracting frequencies and allows for an enormous range of shaping. Moving further right, we come across the first of two new tone filters, the V.L.E. , or Vintage Loudspeaker Emulator , designed



to give you the ability to progressively dial in a frequency curve of a vintage style speaker cab. This control works quite well to round up the overall sound. The V.P.S., or Variable Preshape Filter, allows you to create a narrow drop in the mid-range that can be swept throughout the entire frequency range. This type of control is present on many brands of bass amps, but is generally far too extreme to be used with any confidence and is generally set in one frequency point as a push switch. The Markbass shows this variable sweep filter to be quite a useful tool in overall shaping. The last thing on the front panel is the Master Volume.

The Cabinet itself presents as a fairly small ( 30" tall , 23" wide , and 19" deep) unit and is very striking with its bright yellow cones. Rating at 800watts rms, it feels very solid without being very heavy at all. I then stacked up and ran the amp with my Ken Smith 6 string bass .

This bass has a huge range and gives a lot of PAs trouble in reproducing its whole tone spectrum. Setting everything on flat and bringing the volume up to around 1/3 of max output gave me a big sound that was very well balanced as regard to bass/mid/treble content. I was immediately struck by just how much grunt this amp has, even running at only 8 ohms ! ( the heads all run at 300 watts @ 8 ohms, and 500 watts at 4 ohm minimum load.) The tone that was given at the flat EQ setting was just what I would be selecting to use myself after tweaking, and so it is very easy to get a great tone very quickly. The next move was to try my Stuart Spector active 5 string with the amp at the flat setting and then to jump to my Fender P-Bass. All three of my basses produce very different signals indeed, and it's the sign of a very good amp that I needed no tweaking to get very good and useable tones from them with only a quick change of Master Volume to compensate for the Active / Passive changes in level. This reinforces the line taken by the makers that a good amp should NOT colour the signal of your bass , but only give you exactly what the instrument is doing. This is an amp that does this in spades, and is the only amp I've met since my Polytone that will do this trick at this level. The overall voice of this amp is extremely clean and precise, and shows no clouding at all. The overall feel to me was of robust simplicity and high quality and the tonality and range of the amp reinforce that you are dealing with a very high level professional product. The acid test to me is the lack of EQing needed to bring the amp up to an acceptable level of sound ... most of the shaping has already been done at flat. Having passed that test, how far will the EQ extend to give us different shaping? In the case of the Markbass, the answer is almost limitless. I truly believe that if you know how to pull a sound, the Markbass will deliver that sound to you with a minimum of effort, as its EQ is both very comprehensive and also easy to use and understand. I found that I could shape almost any tonality with any of the three basses that I used, but once again, it sounded great flat with a touch of level to pump a bit of air.

In summary, I'd say that Markbass delivers the goods in all respects, and seems to be very reasonably priced as well. Check them out .