





## Rees Big-F-Light

Nick Wells examines the wares of Cambridge luthier Clive Rees, who's leading the lightweight revolution in bass guitar design.

**F**or Clive Rees and the Rees F-Light bass, there is an interesting story of development to tell, beginning with a custom request to build a 6-string professional-quality travel guitar for Ben Smith, a semi-pro performing musician, who wanted to tour America in just three months. The result was the Rees Rambler travel guitar – an electric guitar small

enough to carry on aeroplanes frequently without fear of damage or loss. 'Logic dictated that there should be a big sister to the Rambler,' explains Clive, 'and that's the Rees F-Light, which in a small gig bag is also a realistic aeroplane carry-on. However, I found that the guys who were buying it weren't casually travelling frequently. They wanted it for its lightweight and professional

playability and tone, because they play long gigs and are either older or have bad necks, which have come from playing industry standard-weight basses. Bass players tend to be the bigger blokes and few women play bass guitars (though quite a few women play double bass nowadays, which you do not have to carry while playing). The reason is obvious to me. Bass guitars are generally

too heavy. However, some bass players have been concerned that the F-Light might not have enough "stage presence" if you are tall. So I found a way to make a bass of normal size that is lightweight and sounds great. The result was a two-pickup version of the F-Light and a full-sized-body version, the Big-F-Light, hand-built and powered by a pair of Seymour Duncan pickups. The mechanical requirements were to produce a lightweight instrument that's very comfortable to play when standing or sitting, without any compromise of tone. Let's see if good things really do come in small packages.

### Body & Neck

The body is constructed from two matched, centre-joined pieces of korina (a hardwood made famous for its use by Gibson in its Flying V and Explorer guitars in the late 50s). Prized for its workability, the body has a fantastic light-golden finish and has been smoothly contoured and shaped so that it retains a thin profile and light weight (the Big-F-Light bass is lighter than a solid Strat or Telecaster guitar) yet has enough body in its central section to still feel comfortable and not too small. The extended upper horn also allows the bass



The headstock is fitted with a set of Gotoh tuners





The hard maple neck is fitted with a rosewood board

to hang nicely on the strap.

The neck is finished with a bipolymer lacquer and has a smooth satin finish that's incredibly comfortable in use. It's made from hard maple, with a full-scale length and a rosewood fingerboard (maple fingerboards are available at a surcharge of £40). The unusual spearhead headstock has a gloss finish and may seem a bit dated in its design, but Rees do offer an alternative shape. The Big-F-Light has a real feel of quality to it. You can immediately tell that it's been built by hand, rather than a production line run-off. It's light, easy to carry and feels great to play.

### Hardware

Going back to Clive Rees's initial design brief, the electronic requirements were to make a bass with both an excellent P-Bass tone and an excellent humbucker tone without resorting to the unreliability of battery-powered pickups. The solution came in the form of two Seymour Duncan vintage-style pickups. 'We tried several different pickup types and combinations on prototypes and found that a great humbucker tone can be got by running these two pickups together in series.' Seymour Duncan's SBP split pickup is based on Leo Fender's 1957 dual-coil design, with hand-ground sand-cast magnets, plain enamel wire and hand-fabricated forbon bobbins. The SJB-1 single-coil uses

hand-ground alnico 5 magnets and more moderate windings (if you wanted a single pickup bass, the RRP is reduced to £735). They're wired to a passive circuit comprising volume and tone rotary knobs, and a four-way pickup selector switch that allows you to select either pickup independently, both pickups wired in parallel as on a Jazz Bass, or both pickups wired in series, like a humbucker.

The remaining hardware is all chrome-plated, including the Gotoh tuners and the solid one-piece bridge, which is complete



with individual, fully adjustable saddles.

### Sounds

The Big-F-Light is capable of producing a wide range of nicely balanced bass tones. We were a little sceptical, given its light weight and streamlined shape, but there is enough depth in the body to ensure a strong fundamental bass sound that's nicely balanced with a bright and articulate tone. The four-way selector switch gives you plenty of options, and by offering four different pickup

configurations you have four different sounds at your disposal at the flick of a switch. When moving through the different settings, each is in keeping with the overall character of the bass, yet individually voiced to sound distinctly different.

The bridge pickup is the place to start for traditional single-coil sounds that are clear, articulate and well defined, certainly in Jazz Bass territory. Switching to what Rees list as the 'dual smooth' setting, with both pickups in parallel, and immediately the sound fills out, giving you a deeper, warmer tone at the expense of some higher frequencies. The third setting calls up a bright and punchy humbucking tone that offers a good mix of low-end frequencies and a responsive high end. The final position reverts to a classic P-Bass tone: with slightly less output with more emphasis on the low end. It's such a simple, yet effective set-up that makes it so easy to find your preferred combination without having to twiddle any knobs. While you can refine your tone with the tone control, the real plus points here go to the four very usable sounds available via the pickup selector switch.

### Conclusion

The Rees Big-F-Light is well designed, extremely lightweight and comfortable to play, and the intuitive pickup layout gives you four very workable sounds at the flick of a switch. Despite its small size, construction is reassuringly solid, meaning you can dig in at a gig just as you would any other bass, and for those who prefer the physical presence offered by a Jazz Bass or a StingRay, then the Big-F-Light would make for an ideal backup instrument.

However, the more we played this bass, the more we started to wonder why there aren't more basses this size. Its full-scale length, playability and sheer convenience make it a no-brainer for those struggling with back or shoulder injuries, and the lightweight design doesn't compromise your tone. The flexibility offered by the different pickup settings is another huge plus.



The strings are held in place by a solid one-piece bridge



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

## REES BIG-F-LIGHT

Price: £815

Built in: UK

Scale length: 863 mm (34 inches)

Frets: 20

Nut width: 41 mm

Neck: Hard maple

Fingerboard: Rosewood

Body: Solid African korina

Pickups: 1 x Seymour Duncan SPB-1

Vintage P-Bass, 1 x Seymour Duncan

SJB-1 Vintage J-Bass

Controls: Master volume, tone, 4-way pickup selector

Machine heads: Gotoh bass tuners

Bridge: Solid 1-piece block with 4 saddles

Finish: Bipolymer lacquer, plus oil, plus wax

Weight: 3.3 kg (7 lb)

Colour: tobacco sunburst; black sunburst; amber sunburst; dark cherry sunburst; natural korina; golden korina; stripy black; stripy brown; dark cherry red

Options: Maple fretboard (plus £40), single pickup (RRP: £735)

## CONTACT DETAILS

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## WHAT WE THINK

**Plus:** Comfortable, lightweight body coupled with versatile bass sounds.**Minus:** None**Overall:** A lightweight and very playable bass.

## BGM RATING OUT OF FIVE

BGM RATING



**We asked BGM reader Dave Mitchell-Jones, bassist with Cambridge jam band Bijoumiyo, for his thoughts on his Rees Big F-Light.**

### How long have you had your Rees bass?

My Rees bass was made for me in February 2010. I'd been hunting for the right bass for years, trying to find a sound. After speaking to Clive Rees about my basses and what I like and what I thought I was after, he came up with the perfect pickup solution to solve my problems.

### Did you have any specific requirements?

The neck is like a P-Bass, a good size in the hand and doesn't taper towards the nut. It's a glossed maple board, which I find has a warmer sound to rosewood, and the korina body is freakishly light, which is great when gigging for hours. The pickups are Seymour Duncan, a split-

humbucker, a Jazz-style single-coil at the bridge, and a toggle which allows me to select different combinations.

### How does it sound?

I've been running it through a 300-watt Ashdown amp and the actual tone of the bass is amazing, very rich and bright. Using the different pickup settings and the tone pot you can mould it into pretty much whatever bass sound you want. For playing fingerstyle, it's got everything – the soft centre of the split pickup for all those reggae, soul and Motown players, and the funky Jazz bridge pickup for the tight and punchy side of rock and jazz. Chords ring out brightly without too much bottom end. Slapping and strumming, for me, has got easier with the choice of sounds and the string spacing. Even tapping the strings is OK, though I don't do much of it. With a pick, which again I don't use often, it still sounds good – boosting the amp and dialling back the tone control worked best for me here, so the sound wasn't so bright.

### How does it compare to other basses you've played?

This Rees bass is by far the best bass I've played. Since owning it, all my others have gone into retirement (Fender Precision, Warwick 5 Corvette, Ibanez Ergodyne), to the point that I might sell them so I can buy another Rees bass!



### For more info on Dave or Bijoumiyo visit:

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