



# Ovation Magnum 1 Stereo bass

The modern Ovation guitar looks unforgettably distinctive, but there was a time when their designs were rather less defined, reckons Roger Newell



about the same period, but with less appealing proportions. Sexy it ain't, but if the looks are perhaps a little off-putting, actually playing this curio is, surprisingly, a rather enjoyable experience. However, more of that later. Here we have the Magnum 1, made in the USA, utilising bolt-on neck construction and featured here in fretless format, still fairly uncommon at that time. The design incorporates two pickups set in what at first appears to be a rail system for positional adjustment, but in fact is apparently there just for looks... At least it doubles as a thumb rest, I suppose, but the plot is already going seriously wonky. Being equipped with both mono and stereo jack sockets (in Rickenbacker tradition), the controls offered are Volume and Tone for each pickup and a basic 3-way switch for either/both selection. These two pickups however are vastly different from each other, both visually and in performance, making the stereo option essential since in mono mode their respective outputs differ enormously, with the smaller bridge unit being the dominant sonic partner. The monstro neck pickup is designed with a separate coil for each pole piece, and possesses the ultimate in string output balancing where each pole piece has its own volume control, set just below the pickup surface and accessed/adjusted by a fine-blade screwdriver, an interesting and genuinely good idea.

The bridge pickup is a much less bulky affair but again features design innovation

in the form of two side-by-side coils serving the large pole pieces which are U-shaped.

Being routed into the body surface gives the bridge a less physically bulky appearance; it's a diecast affair with brass saddles which slide in guide slots and are locked into place by means of a locating screw. More curiously, at the side of each of these slots is a scale-marked intonation system finely inscribed into the metal, which really doesn't provide anything of value that a pair of ears and/or a tuner couldn't achieve in terms of obtaining accurate adjustment. What *is* missing, though, is height adjustment for the saddles, and so by means of compensation there is an allen screw at the back of the body, behind the bridge, which tilts the *whole* bridge assembly to provide minimal height alteration. The bridge also incorporates a drawbar damping facility with a pad coming into contact with the strings when the slide arm is pushed into the unit, as per Gibson's EB-3. (The pad itself is missing on this particular oldie.)

The headstock is the standard distinctive Ovation design, at least *that's* recognisable, and it lends itself surprisingly well to the proportions required for bass. Tuners are of Schaller origin but carry an 'Ovation' inscription on each. The truss rod is accessed at this end, under the nameplate.

## Performance Notes

What took me totally by surprise were the even weighting balance characteristics of this instrument, with the weight of the body wood being keenly offset by the headstock. The neck has a good feel, if a little bulky, and the ebony fingerboard seems quite luxuriantly smooth, which aids in keeping *glisses* fat and even. With the slightly oversized scale length at which this bass is set, it should give a defined and throaty output but, sadly, in the tonal stakes the Magnum 1 is painfully limited, with the tone pots themselves only

Ovation is a name rarely associated with the solid bodied bass guitar, in fact if it wasn't for the introduction of their excellent acoustic shorter scale model then they would probably not be known as a bass manufacturer at all. However, they did venture a tentative toe into the water of the bass market in the 70s with the Magnum which managed a couple of models, but the water must have been too hot for comfort because, in effect, they came and went without anyone really noticing.

Certainly the Magnum possesses an instantly forgettable shape with overtones of their rather better known (and genuinely attractive) Breadwinner guitar of

offering alteration at their very extremes, a typical problem from the old passive styles of circuitry. The imbalance of the pickup outputs introduces a further obstacle in getting a good variety of sound as, whatever you seem to try, the most usable sound contains an undesirably topky edge, more especially surprising given the amount of 'dark' wood utilised in the construction of the bass, where even adjusting the individual volume controls on the neck unit cannot fully compensate. Using the neck pickup alone still fails to produce a really fat sound, and also suffers from lack of power.

More woes. The damper slider is uncomfortable if you wish to play tight to the bridge, as it just keeps getting infuriatingly in the way. Yet strangely, in spite of all this, the Magnum is a fun bass to play and a good-feeling fretless. The sound is at least all its own, and the unavoidable edgy quality keeps it clearly defined and consequently rather modern, though more by accident than design. I guess it's back to the old 'one man's meat...' viewpoint and certainly, if you have a penchant for the unusual, this fits the bill nicely. It should also be taken into account that with modern day amplification, the Magnum's sonic shortcomings could be largely rectified.

## Part II

The Magnum 1 was followed closely (not surprisingly) by the Magnum II. Shape and pickup configuration remained, but the electronics changed quite radically, the major difference being that the tone pots were replaced by a graphic equaliser consisting of three sliders for Bass, 400Hz and Treble (each running in two slots and affecting both pickups) and, as this machine is mono, has just the one volume control. How far this came to improving the tonal range is difficult to say without trying both models back to back,



## Basic info

### Ovation Magnum 1 Stereo Bass

**ORIGIN:** USA  
**MATERIALS**  
**Body:** Mahogany  
**Neck:** Mahogany  
**Fingerboard:** Ebony  
**Nut:** Plastic  
**Hardware:** Black diecast

#### DIMENSIONS

**Scale length:** 875mm  
**Nut width:** 42mm  
**Neck:**  
**depth at nut:** 23mm  
**width at octave:** 57mm  
**depth at octave:** 27mm  
**width at top:** 62mm  
**String spacing:**  
**At nut:** 10mm average  
**At bridge:** 17mm  
**Overall length:** 1190mm  
**Body depth:** 37mm  
**Body width:** 340mm

#### GENERAL

**Pickups:** 2  
**Controls:** 2 x Volume, 2 x Tone, 3-way Pickup selector switch  
**Finish:** Natural  
**Weight:** 4.5kgs

unfortunately. In the meantime, many thanks to reader Gordon Rowe down in Somerset for the shots of his own Magnum II and indeed for putting us on the trail of this fascinating instrument.

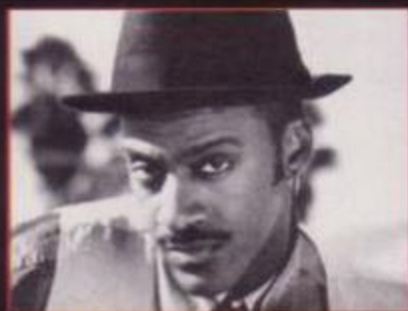
## Afterthought

It's hardly surprising that this breed of bass failed to emerge into the big time, but they do still appear occasionally, noticeably with Jah Wobble, and that sound is very typical of this bass. It's a pity that Ovation did not pursue this line of solid bodied basses any further, as some of their ideas could have been successfully developed, though perhaps if they had continued down that path, we might never have seen the acoustic beauties for which Ovation are rightly lauded.

Many thanks also to The Bass Centre in Wapping (0171 265 1567) for the loan of this elusive machine.

No thanks at all to Ovation for repeatedly failing to respond to requests for further historical information. ■

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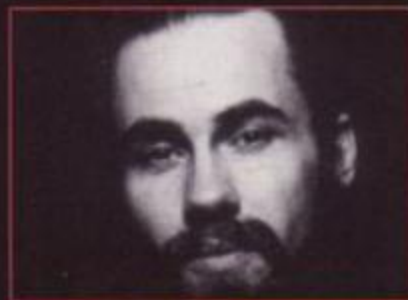
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