



# SOUNDROOM



## Kiesel & Carvin JB Basses

BY ED FRIEDLAND

**TOYOTA HAS LEXUS, HONDA HAS ACURA, NISSAN** has Infiniti, and now Carvin has Kiesel Guitars. This year, the family-owned business introduced a new brand, with the mission to build Carvin models with higher-end finishes and unique cosmetic treatments. Beginning with the introduction of last year's Vanquish models, the Southern California-based company stepped it up with wood and finish combinations that took advantage of the instruments' unique architecture. Designed by Carvin vice president Jeff Kiesel, the Vanquish set in motion a passion for design and finish work. While Kiesel Guitars is the moniker for the "luxury" line, under the paint are the high-quality U.S.-built instruments Carvin founded its solid reputation on. This month, we'll look at the new JB model, the Carvin version of the famed Jazz Bass, in 4- and 5-string versions.

Essentially a replacement for the popular (but short-lived) SB model, the JB follows more traditional lines, but the big difference lies in the revamped power plant. Sporting the new Carvin JVA single-coil pickups and a redesigned preamp, the JB is a versatile performer. The JVA pickups, developed by Carvin president Mark Kiesel, use "43-gauge poly wire, where the new JVAs use 42-gauge brown plain enamel wire. The new wire has more copper content, and we find we can use more of it without losing the high frequencies. The pickups are internally shielded and have a better signal-to-noise ratio than most pickups." While the upgraded wire and taller bobbin add to the production cost, Carvin feels the improvement

in tone outweighs the expense. The new preamp is available in two basic configurations, a 2-band with passive bypass and tone, or a 3-band circuit that adds sweepable midrange control with no passive bypass mode. The JB is built standard with a mid-'70s Jazz Bass pickup placement—which has the neck pickup centered roughly 27½" from the nut, and the bridge pickup at 31¾". It can also be ordered with standard 1960s placement, which brings the bridge pickup ¼" closer to the neck. To get the most range from the two sample instruments, Carvin sent a 2-band JB5 with '70s spacing, and a 3-band-equipped JB4 with '60s spacing.

Both instruments were built from swamp ash, though the Kiesel 5-string featured a one-piece body (an \$80 upgrade). Structurally, they both came with five-piece necks built with quartersawn maple, with walnut stringers in the case of the JB5. Carvin has gone back to using graphite stabilizer rods in its necks, this time supergluing them into channels for a rock-solid, unified neck. The neck/fingerboard constructions are conditioned in a dehumidifying kiln for two to four weeks after gluing, and I suspect this extra attention contributes to the stability I witnessed when the climate in Central Texas went from biblical flooding to desert-dry in the span of one week. The JB5 features the 14"-radius fingerboard that is standard for all Carvin 5ers, but I chose the more rounded 10" radius for the JB4 to get closer to a vintage vibe. The body design gives you great access to the 22nd fret, and both instruments have ¾" string spacing at the bridge for a familiar feel.



Both the JB4 and JB5 were beautiful specimens—the 4-string had the Carvin antique ash treatment that made the grain pop from under a dreamy transparent aqua-burst finish. The abalone block inlays tie the birdseye maple board and matching headstock cap together with symmetry and style. Chrome hardware and a white pearloid pickguard complete a tastefully head-turning look that screams custom. The Kiesel-designed JB5 takes the concept of subtle beauty to a new level. The body also received the antique-ash treatment with a rubbed-through medium-black stain. From a distance, it appears gray, but closer inspection reveals three-dimensional grain detail in shades of brown and black that draw in the eye. But the highly figured birdseye-maple fingerboard stained to match the body really stole the show. Combined with black acrylic-block inlays, the neck made several of my bandmates gasp in awe. While the review bass was elegantly subdued, the Kiesel Custom Guitar gallery on the Carvin website showcases some of Jeff's more off-the-hook designs.

While the JB pair have serious visual appeal, they also play like champions. The pickup blend on the JB4 has the throaty character of a '60s Jazz, but the flexible EQ lets you easily dial in a quintessential modern slap tone, or darken it up for rootsy applications. Yes—single coils will be single coils, and there is some 60-cycle hum when soloing the neck or bridge pickup, but thanks to good shielding, it's minimal. The review bass came with individual volume controls for each pickup, but a blend control can be substituted. With the slightly neckward '60s placement of the bridge pickup, the JB4 captured a burpy solo tone that inspired a visit to Teen Town, but the ample EQ could make it sting like the late Louis Johnson when slapped. My only complaint was the lack of passive bypass mode with the 3-band EQ. While I

prefer having the mid control, these pickups sound too good in passive mode not to have the option.

While toneful, easy to play, and highly attractive, the JB4 was still a bit overshadowed by its Kiesel cousin. This particular instrument hung at the Carvin Winter NAMM booth, and more than one bass geek commented, "You've got *that* one?" when I mentioned the review. The Kiesel JB5 showed great consistency across the fingerboard: The B string was tight, well defined, and free from noxious overtones, but also balanced well with the rest of the bass. Playing up the G string, the notes had unusual authority without the dead zone that plagues many bolt-on neck instruments. The '70s pickup placement and bass/treble EQ were perfect for attaining that most-coveted slap tone, and I installed a set of Dunlop Marcus Miller Super Brights to seal the deal. (Carvin ships its basses with Dunlop Super Brights.) On a pop/R&B gig, the JB5 gave me a smooth, studio-quality tone that filled out the bottom and sparkled when needed. Taken out to a roots-rock show, the JVA's proved their mettle in passive mode, with the organic thump and firm midrange presence that establishes a dominant role in the mix. The JB5 was responsive to a wide range of dynamics, and the neck felt great in the hand.

The Carvin/Kiesel JB models are excellent examples of what can be done with the J-bass platform. There are enough wood and finish options to ensure a configuration for every taste, and the performance rivals instruments with much higher price tags. Carvin did not simply crank out yet another J-style axe—instead, it invested time and money to bring out an instrument that stands on its own merits. With the establishment of the Kiesel Guitars brand, Carvin can now proudly stamp the family name on some of the most captivating designs around. **BP**



## SPECIFICATIONS

KIESEL &amp; CARVIN

### Kiesel JB5

**Direct** \$1,664 (as reviewed)

**Pros** Excellent consistency, studio-quality tone

**Cons** Some minimal 60-cycle hum

**Bottom Line** A killer specimen of one of the most popular bass formats.

### Carvin JB4

**Direct** \$1,474 (as reviewed)

**Pros** Throaty but flexible tone; tastefully attractive

**Cons** No passive bypass on 3-band EQ

**Bottom Line** A prime contender in the J-style category, and a great value for a U.S. build.

**Contact** [carvin.com](http://carvin.com)

S P E C S

### Kiesel JB5

**Construction** Bolt-on

**Body** Ash

**Neck** Five-piece maple/walnut, graphite reinforced

**Fingerboard** Treated birdseye maple w/ black acrylic block inlays

**Fingerboard radius** 14"

**Frets** 22, .103 x .048 medium-jumbo

**Nut** Graphite/teflon

**Neck width at nut** 1.75"

**Bridge** Carvin Locking, convertible, 3/4" string spacing

**Scale length** 34"

**Pickups** Carvin JVA single coil

**Controls** Volume, blend, passive tone, bass/treble

**Tuners** Carvin 20:1 ratio

**Weight** 9.0 lbs

**Made in** USA

### Carvin JB4

**Construction** Bolt-on

**Body** Ash

**Neck** Five-piece maple, graphite reinforced

**Fingerboard** Birdseye maple w/abalone block inlays

**Fingerboard radius** 10"

**Frets** 22, .103 x .048 medium-jumbo

**Nut** Graphite/teflon

**Neck width at nut** 1.75"

**Bridge** Carvin Locking, convertible, 3/4" string spacing

**Scale length** 34"

**Pickups** Carvin JVA single coil

**Controls** Neck volume, bridge volume, mid/sweep, bass/treble

**Tuners** Carvin 20:1 ratio

**Weight** 8.6 lbs

**Made in** USA