

# Gear

## STOMPBOX FEVER



### Tech 21 Oxford, Leeds, and U.S. Steel TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS

**TECH 21 WAS THE FIRST ENTRANT** into what is now called amp modeling technology with its SansAmp, an all-analog pedal that emulated not only the sound of a tube amp, but also a miked speaker cabinet. Two decades later, and still using analog technology, Tech 21 continues to make variations on the all-purpose SansAmp, which offers a choice of generalized California, British, and Tweed tones. More recently, the company has honed in on the sounds of specific amplifier brands with the Character Series. The first release of these pedals included the British (Marshall), Liverpool (Vox), California (Mesa/Boogie) and Blonde (tweed Fender). Now we take a look at the latest additions to the line, which are the Oxford, Leeds, and U.S. Steel.

All of the Character pedals feature Level and Drive controls, along with a complement of Low, Mid, and High knobs

that provide a wide range of tonalities. A Character knob morphs between different model voicings to cover clean, vintage crunch, traditional, and modern lead tones. The Character and Mid controls, as well as the speaker emulations, have been engineered to reflect the specific traits and speaker configurations associated with each amplifier type. The three new pedals add a button to disengage the speaker emulation when using the pedal in front of a combo or head. I tested these new Character pedals with a 1965 Fender Stratocaster, running them into my computer DAW, as well as Orange Tiny Terror and Egnater Rebel 30 amps.

#### OXFORD

Given the name and the color, there is little doubt about the origin of this Character pedal. Oxford, England, is the home of Orange amplifiers, a company that was popular enough to have its own shop in

London in the '60s, but was overshadowed at the time by the popularity of Marshall and Vox. As with Hiwatt, the Orange clean sound straddles the U.S./British border, and the Oxford (\$169 street) represents this tone with astonishing accuracy. Drive-wise this pedal proved very versatile, capable of mild crunch and subtle blues grit, as well as classic Brit-rock solo tones. In an A/B test I did between the Oxford and two of the major amp modeling software programs, the Oxford was the hands down winner when it came to richness of tone and realistic dynamic feel.

**KUDOS** Delivers authentic '60s Orange amp tones.

**CONCERNS** None.

#### LEEDS

This pedal's name refers to Pete Townsend's Hiwatt-fired tones on the Who's seminal album *Live at Leeds*. It is interesting that people (myself included) refer to amps as having a "British" sound, as if there were only one sound coming from across the pond. Obviously the tonalities of Marshall, Vox, Orange, and Hiwatt amps vary—and viva la difference! Hiwatts can sound like a hybrid of American and British attributes, and the Tech

#### MORE ONLINE



- Watch this video demo of the Oxford.
- Hear the Leeds in action.
- Check out the U.S. Steel.

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21 Leeds pedal (\$169 street) has nailed that combination. It features the soft low end and midrange warmth associated with Fender amps, combined with some upper range British edge that defines the Hiwatt sound. Like its inspiration, the pedal offers rich clean tones when the Character knob is kept counter-clockwise. Moving it to noon while raising the Drive produced extremely articulate crunch rhythm tones.

The Leeds excelled at clean and highly driven lead sounds, but was less successful at producing slightly overdriven blues tones, tending to mush out on the neck pickup of my Strat. When I pushed it with the overdrive channel of an Electro-Harmonix Germanium 4 Big Muff, however, it reacted exactly like a real amp—delivering more drive without changing the character of the sound. In fact, let me say before we go any further that all three Tech 21 pedals provide a feel that is more like playing the real amplifiers than any software modeler and most digital hardware modeling devices I've used.

**KUDOS** Dead-on Hiwatt attitude. Feels like a real amp.

**CONCERNS** Not for traditional blues tones.

**U.S. STEEL**

If the trucker mud flap design doesn't give it away, the first crunched chord will; the U.S. Steel (\$169 street) models the Mesa/Boogie Rectifier, a perennially popular amplifier with metal bands. If you drop the Drive and Character knobs to their minimum settings you can get a nice warm clean tone, but that is not where this pedal excels. As with all the Character pedals, the EQ controls offer a wide range of sounds: go easy on the Drive, boost the Mids, and add a noon setting on the Character control, and it will put you in Santana territory. But it is with the mids rolled down, and the Character and Drive turned up that the pedal shows its true mettle.

At higher settings the Character knob tightens the bass into a focused thud that welcomes a rapid-fire picking hand. With the Bass control at about two o'clock I could

practically feel my pant leg flapping, even though I was playing through the computer with my monitors set at apartment volume. Speed metal fans will also appreciate the zero latency of using this modeling pedal when laying down those 16th- and 32nd-note rhythms.

While it's true that digital software and hardware modeling rule when it comes to instantly accessing a plethora of amp tones and manipulating them in real time, if you want to get the sound of a specific classic amp—such as the Mesa Recto—recorded quickly, quietly, easily, and accurately—or want to add that amp's tonality *and* feel to a different rig for live playing, you owe it to yourself to try out the U.S. Steel or any of Tech 21's other great Character offerings.

**KUDOS** A mélange of metal tones. Excels at scooped sounds.

**CONCERNS** None.

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