

## TONE TIPS

## 4 Premium Preamp Pedals to Juice your Tone

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The word "preamp" can meet a lot of different things, depending on the context. Audio engineers tend to think of a preamp as a device for powering a microphone and/or amplifying its signal prior to recording, while audiophiles think of a preamp as the thing that comes before their power amplifier, featuring volume and equalization controls, and some switching functions. In guitar speak, a preamp can be an integrated section of a guitar amplifier's circuitry, which (much like the stereo preamp) often contains tone and gain controls, or it can be a similarly functional external unit meant to enter the signal chain before the guitar amp, running either straight in the front, or in the effects loop. Such a device would typically serve as the main source of EQ, drive, and other tonesculpting capabilities. Many older guitarists associate the term "preamp" closely with formerly ubiquitous eighties rack units from A/DA, Marshall, Mesa/Boogie, and other companies. Current guitar preamp options are much more varied, however, and the most convenient choice for the modern pedalboard-bound guitarist is probably a pedal preamp.

So, you might be thinking at this point, if a preamp is just a pedal that has tone, gain, and volume controls, what makes it different from a regular old distortion pedal with EQ? Well, the answer is complicated. Some pedals marketed as preamps really have nothing more to offer than a standard dirt box layout with basic EQ, while other, seemingly similar, units are much more deserving of the moniker, serving as a complete sound solution that can work equally well in front of a guitar amp, clean power amp, in an effects loop, or even direct into a recorder or PA system. These types of preamplifiers can be superb tools for traveling guitarists that need a powerful, portable gigging device that can serve as a complete tone foundation, providing a consistent sound no matter the backline or recording scenario. Here are a few of our top picks for fully-featured pedal preamps.



### Tech 21 Character Series

One of the most affordable and versatile options for proper pedal-based guitar preamplifiers comes from Tech 21, a pioneering company in the preamp game. Tech 21 basically invented analog amp modeling when it released the original SansAmp in 1989, a pedal-sized box with several different modeled amp tones intended for use as a direct recording interface. The company's very popular Character Series continues in this tradition with a wide range of analog pedal preamps that model amps from Fender, Marshall, Mesa, Orange, Hiwatt, and more. These compact preamps are perfectly at home being used as drive pedals running in front of a guitar amp, but they really come alive when pushing a big, clean power amp, or connected directly into a recording console with the speaker emulation switch activated. Tech 21's speaker modeling has always been top-notch, and the Character Series further improves upon the technology with emulations of specific speakers. For instance, the Leeds preamp includes Fane-style speaker emulation, while the Blonde model includes a very convincing vintage Jensen emulation. Along with a full range of drive, output, and equalization controls, this feature earns the Tech 21 Character Series the maximum bang-for-the-buck award.

A true guitar preamplifier pedal—as opposed to just a standard OD box—can be a very versatile tool for gigging guitar players, especially those who travel frequently and are often at the mercy of rented amplifiers. They are also very useful for any player who records regularly, and values the ability to just plug in, get a tone, and start laying down tracks, without the time and trouble required to set up cabinets, microphones, and everything else that goes along with recording a live amp. And given that many excellent pedal preamps cost about the same, or less, than some boutique overdrives, it's clear that any guitarist considering a new OD or distortion should take a close look at one of the new breed of preamp pedals.