

## Tech 21 SansAmp Character Series Pedals

### "BLONDE"

I'm a guitar-pedal freak—hell and damn if I don't love a stompbox. And while modulation effects and wacky sounds are fun, my favorite boxes are preamp/overdrive devices that push big tone out of a tiny package.

Imagine my delight when Tech 21, the folks who created the legendary SansAmp, introduced a line of SansAmp Character Series pedals, each one tuned to simulate the sounds of classic guitar amps (and one for bass). Tech 21 purports that the Blonde model they sent to *JazzTimes* recreates the sought-after sounds of vintage Fender amps: tweed, blackface and silverface. You doubt this is possible? You're in for a pleasant surprise.

Tech 21 says the Character pedals can be used as part of an effects chain in front of an amp, used as a preamp in tandem with a power amp or PA, or plugged directly into a mixer or computer for recording purposes. The pedal's all-analog electronics are voiced to simulate the sound of a 12-inch Jensen speaker, a feature that can't be turned off; nevertheless, the Blonde sounds great in front of an amp.

The main caveat here is this: If you don't like tweaking knobs, the Blonde ain't for you. This thing has six knobs: three for EQ, plus volume, drive and character controls. And the knobs are capital-S Sensitive. The EQ knobs each have huge sweep—this might be the best pedal EQ ever. And while the drive control gives over to big crunch rather quickly, it yields many styles of overdrive when tweaked along with changes in the volume and character controls. These controls all seem interdependent. Turning one almost always means that you'll need to turn another to find the sweet spot. The character control especially has a drastic effect on what you get. It can make the tone go from silk to granular all by itself, and certain character-knob settings respond to a sharp attack in an exaggerated way. These are some of the most finicky knobs on any pedal I've come across.



But that's a good thing, because fine control makes the Blonde amazingly versatile.

The factory-supplied settings provide trusty leaping-off points to find the Fender amp sounds of yore, from a crunchy Champ to a saturated Bassman to sweet Deluxe Reverb breakup and cushy Twin clean tones. And, if you crank the drive control, the Blonde delivers gonzo overdrive—stuff Dick Dale and ol' Leo himself might bristle at. There is plenty of gain in this thing, but my favorite things about it are the clean tones. I just couldn't get over how brilliant the single coils in my G&L Strat sounded with the Blonde working at about one-third power. Using the pedal as a clean boost will give a direct-recorded guitar a much more "real" sound and, placed in front of an amp, it adds robust, professional character, not to mention giving you another EQ channel.

There's no replacement for an actual amplifier, but for my money Tech 21 does simulation best with the SansAmp line. The Blonde lists for \$195, and street prices hover around \$150. There are loads of overdrive, preamp and boost pedals out there that don't offer EQ, speaker simulation and half the control this box does, and many of them cost just as much, if not more. So I can't consider the Blonde anything other than a bargain. **RUSSELL CARLSON**

### "VT BASS"

In the early days of bass amplification, Ampeg set a high standard for performance with its legendary B-15 flip top and refrigerator-sized SVT/810 models, a benchmark that remains intact for many players. The B-15 was the studio amp of choice



### Cheaper Than Tuition

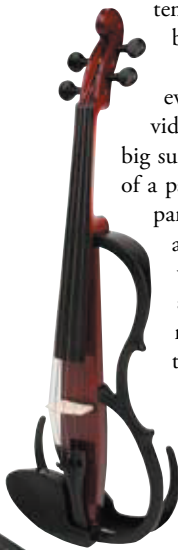
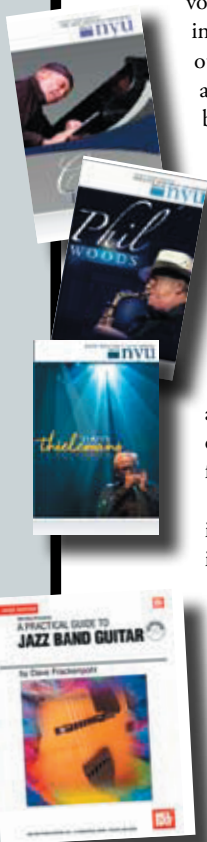
New from NYU Steinhardt and the Artists House Foundation are eight Master Class DVDs featuring Toots Thielemans, Phil Woods, Jimmy and Percy Heath, Hank Jones, Clark Terry, Cecil Taylor, Benny Golson (recorded at Loyola U. in NOLA) and Barry Harris. The very long programs, some of which are packaged as two-disc sets, feature artist performances, student performances with artist commentary and, save for the Golson volume, interviews conducted by our own Gary Giddins. The celebrated critic also turns up in documentary-style conversation segments included as special features, wherein he reaffirms his status as jazz's most insightful talking head. \$19.95. [ahmusicmedia.com](http://ahmusicmedia.com)

### Six-Stringin' Made Simple

Dave Frackenpohl's new Mel Bay book, *A Practical Guide to Jazz Band Guitar*, is just that—a no-frills compendium of the skills every ax-slinger should master before his or her lab-band audition. The lessons begin super-simple—reading notes in open and second positions, basic rhythm-guitar chord shapes—and progress toward blues improvisation, reading in fifth position, triads and inversions and those indispensable Freddie Green voicings. You'll be chugging along behind the horns in no time. A CD with recorded examples is included. \$19.95. [melbay.com](http://melbay.com)

### Wailing at a Whisper

Get your Jean-Luc Ponty on with Yamaha's new SV-150K silent violin, a must-have practice tool for all apartment-bound jazz fiddlers. Part of the company's progressive Silent Strings line, the SV-150K affords the user a completely self-contained practice space, with an integrated tuner, a metronome and a host of onboard effects. \$1,295 list. [yamaha.com](http://yamaha.com)



for electric bassists and the premier gig rig for upright players due to its respectable volume, creamy tube tone and relative portability. The SVT forged its reputation in the hellfires of rock 'n' roll, where it is a mainstay, but its massive tone and high output have kept it a favorite of backline equipment providers for outdoor festivals and large venues. The Ampeg tone is known for its deep, fundamental, rounded bottom, punchy mids and, if pushed, edgy distortion that grinds like a Ditch Witch through asphalt.

But combined, the SVT head and the 8x10 cabinet weigh 250 pounds, so it's no surprise that a gigging bassist might opt for something a little smaller. Even the diminutive B-15 clocks in at 117 pounds, quite a load for an upright bassist playing a basement jazz club.

While the saying "ain't nothing like the real thing" may be true, amplifier-emulation technology has made it possible to get "close enough" with devices that fit in the pocket of your gig bag. Tech 21 began the amp-emulation revolution in 1989 with its original SansAmp pedal. It allowed guitarists to record a variety of amp tones with the convenience of going direct into the recording console. Tech 21's new VT Bass pedal approximates the essential character and functions of Ampeg's two legendary bass amps.

The VT Bass does a remarkable job of copping the famous Ampeg tone, but is it as good as the real thing? No, and yes. Playing in front of an SVT/810 rig is like having an industrial fan connected to a sub-woofer behind you. You can't replicate the air movement, but it does represent an idealized version of how the rig can sound. The volume, low, mid, high and drive controls, as well as the all-important character knob, are all very sensitive, with broad sweeps through their range, and they affect the tone in ways that are predictably Ampeg-like. Set below 12 o'clock, the character knob simulates the SVT with a good degree of accuracy and fine control. At 12 o'clock, the pedal switches to B-15 mode with a more pronounced mid-range voice. Cranking the character above the middle position brings in a distorted edge that retains a strong fundamental.

Using the drive control, you can dial in a full-tilt, punk-assault bass tone or capture the slightly saggy tube compression that an SVT gives on the brink of distortion. However, like many bass distortion devices, the attack of the note tends to get lost when maxed. Blending this with a clean signal would produce better results.

The VT Bass excels at clean tones; in fact, since its arrival, I've used it on every gig, and have yet to turn it off (except for the fly date where they provided a real SVT). The fat, low-mid punch of this pedal is addictive, and the big surprise was how well it worked with my two acoustic basses. Upright players of a particular vintage have fond memories of their B-15s (except for that load-in part)—the combination of a sealed cab, 15-inch speaker and tube power created an amplified tone that brought the bass out of the shadows, and competed with Elvin-esque drummers. The VT Bass sounded first-rate with my gut- and steel-stringed upright basses (both using Realist pickups), fortifying each note with impact similar to a sandbag hitting a wooden floor. And I was able to fine-tune it to work in a variety of acoustic spaces.

Warm, firm bottom never goes out of style for bass players, and the VT delivers that in spades. The treble control provides plenty of boost, but caution is advised—too much treble can melt your brain. I used the VT with several bass guitars, both passive and active, and it enhanced each one without losing the essential identity of the instrument or the pedal. Electric guitarists will confirm that a good pedal has its own feel and personality; it can be a texture as responsive as any acoustic instrument. On the other hand,

while digital amp modeling (whether a standalone unit or a computer-based plug-in) can greatly enhance the recording process, many players using them for live work report a decrease in natural dynamics. Tech 21's emulation approach has always been based on analog circuitry, and that may be why this unit succeeds in the live environment. The VT also records well, though the lack of an XLR output may put off some engineers.

The VT Bass pedal, which lists for \$195 and streets for around \$150, has proven itself a useful and fun tone-shaping tool in a wide range of situations, and while there ain't nothing like the real thing, "close enough" is getting closer all the time. **ED FRIEDLAND**