



Gear Review: Tech 21 RK5 FlyRig

By Bill Evans

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I have known about Tech 21 for a very long time. I first met the team at their HQ in Manhattan back in the '90s when I was doing GIG Magazine. Yes, they proudly and somewhat unbelievably manufactured their products in a building in NYC for a very long time. Up until 2002, when they expanded and moved 14 miles west to Clifton, NJ.

But I had never really used any of it. We did a lot of Tech 21 reviews over the years but I always assigned them to someone else. Up until less than a decade ago, I was a modeling amp guy—largely because I play the kinds of gigs where volume is a huge big deal and I need big tone at low volume. When the newer digital modeling offerings stopped offering models of the Mark Series Mesa Boogie combos—my preferred amp models—I tried to make due but could never get the tone I wanted and finally did what I had wanted to do since the '80s and bought a couple of Boogies. It was around 2008 and the financial meltdown and I was still making really good money as the editor of FOH Magazine and I checked Craigslist several times a day. I scored on some good gear deals.

About the time I was freaking out over the size of my Monster Pedalboard From Hell, the band went into the studio to record tracks for a new video promo. About eight 30-second song “sound bites.” Per the instructions of the agent who asked for this, no solos. Emphasis on vocals and the horn section. I was playing rhythm guitar and most of it clean so in the interest of simplicity, we ran the guitar direct. There was no way there was room for that board, so I used the rack-mount Tech 21 SansAmp that was in the studio. And I really liked it.

So I emailed the Tech 21 folks who, not being millennials, actually read and answer email. And I explained my situation and asked if they had a solution. I needed something that provided some kind of amp emulation (Tech 21 is NOT modeling but more on that in a bit...) that wasn't huge but that had at least a good clean rhythm and high-gain lead sound. And they responded quickly saying that what I needed was the Richie Kotzen RK5 Signature Fly Rig. So I asked them to send one for a review and if I liked it I would sell the HD400 and buy it. (I shipped the HD400 to its new owner about a week ago...)

When it arrived I had no idea what the box was. I thought it looked like business cards but I knew I had not ordered new cards in months. I was astounded to open the box and see this little tiny pedal board. I fired it up and was pretty happy but was using it to drive a real amp (an early '60s Fender Princeton that I bought at a garage sale 30 years ago and that is in my office). The test would come at the next rehearsal where I planned to run it right into the PA.

On the surface it's like a three-slot mini pedal board. But there is hidden stuff.

Starting in the middle, there is the famous Tech 21 amp emulation. It can be overdriven but it is voiced for a clean sound. To the left is a very good delay section with a hidden setting that will give you a decent chorus-like sound and to the right is a section titled OMG. This is where the RK really comes in. It stands for Ritchie Kotzen—a hotshot guitar player best known for replacing C.C. DeVille in Poison and Paul Gilbert in Mr. Big and for the band The Winery Dogs with Mike Portnoy and Billy Sheehan. It stands officially as maybe the favorite distortion unit I have ever used. Ever. On it's own, it's pretty good. But in conjunction with the dirty rhythm channel on the Mark III it is magic. Getting the rhythm chunk of a 4x12 out of a combo amp is supposed to be impossible. But it just kind of magically happens when the OMG circuit is engaged. It has literally changed the way I play. I am substantially more aggressive when using it.

The RK5 is all-metal and powered by a standard wall-wart style power supply. Oh and I nearly forgot. There is a clean boost available in the OMG section, too.

The rubber really hit the road at the next full band rehearsal. I brought a guitar and the RK5 and two cables and nothing else. The output ran into the rehearsal PA. As mentioned earlier, the Tech 21 stuff is an all-analog emulation of a guitar amp. It is NOT digital modeling. And, I know I'm late to the party, but at this point I am liking it better. There are no weird artifacts and it just sounds chunky and REAL. I dialed in a sound that was pretty close to clean with the guitar volume dialed back and that broke up just a little when the guitar was maxed. The studio where we rehearse has a large selection of good guitar amps including Fenders and Marshalls. And I promise that not using them was not missed at all. It was nothing short of a revelation to be able to carry something so small and get through an entire night.

So, here is where we stand...

I wanted something to use as an emergency backup. What I got was a piece that has become an important part of my rig even when I am using an amp, The RK5 can do double duty and allow me to go direct if my rig bites the dust or if volume concerns demand a direct input. Plus, my board is WAY smaller now. The RK5 has made me more than a bit happier. It's a keeper.