

review



Has the quest for the ultimate guitar recording tool reached its end?

SansAmp PSA-1.1

REVIEW BY DARWIN GROSSE

Tone is the Holy Grail for guitarists. Talk to any reasonably seasoned player, and you will eventually spin off into a conversation about the perfect guitar or the perfect amp; this is perhaps because a player will respond to great sound with great playing.

Tech 21 is a company with focus on tone, tone and tone, with rich-sounding direct boxes, ultra-obsessive XXL distortion pedals, and industrial-grade combo amps. Among a diverse range of products, it's the SansAmp technology that brought Tech 21 to the attention of the audio world, and with the release of the SansAmp PSA-1.1, the company has declared war on weak guitar tone.

Description

At one rack space, and with a clean and classy silver face, the PSA-1.1 is a subtle but attractive addition to a gear rack. Look more closely, however, and you will see that this is a tweaker's dream. Featuring eight controls for the amplifier settings, you have more control under your fingertips than most "normal" amps offer.

Perhaps the most interesting parts of this layout are the four controls dedicated to "Character" (or what you and I might call distortion). The Buzz control sets the low-end distortion, the Punch control manages the midrange, and the Crunch control pushes the upper harmonics. Combined with the Drive control (for power amp distortion emulation), they add up to a wealth of distortion tailoring for the discerning guitarist.

There is also a two-band tone-control section (Low and High), and both Pre-amp and Level setting for pre- and post-processing control. The Pre-

custom settings, and the PSA accepts MIDI program change messages for choosing new presets while in the heat of battle.

The back of this unit has a bunch of interesting connectivity options, such as "input 2", which provides more control over the input level, and the effects send system, which includes a "50/50" switch for bus-like send effects processing (typically used for reverb and other master effects). There are both 1/4" and XLR outputs, and even a dedicated headphone output for shredding when the kids are asleep.

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amp section has, in tiny print, a label describing the final 10% of its range as the "After Burner" setting, which activates a low-cut/hi-boost function for extreme attack. Finally, a Trim control allows you to tame the output of the unit across all presets; it is, in essence, a master volume control.

And speaking of presets, the PSA-1.1 has 49 heartstoppingly good ones. From pounding Marshall emulations to sweet and jazzy combo sounds, this box delivers the goods right out of the package. You also have another 77 memory slots waiting for your modified presets or

User Experience

If I had to use one word for this unit, it would probably be "powerful". It's obvious that the Tech 21 people have a fetish for great distortion, and the PSA-1.1 delivers it in many different flavors. While tone can be easily altered, the results tend to jump out of a mix like no other device I've yet tried.

Those of you familiar with guitar recording boxes are probably wondering, "How many effects emulations are there?" The simple answer is this—none. This is not a digital effects

box, or a modeling system of any sort. It is an all-analog system, with only enough digital electronics to support saving presets. The result of this analog-centric system is extreme playability, with an almost tube-like response to playing articulations.

A negative aspect to the digital control system is stair-stepping noise when changing control settings. On the one hand, it is convenient to know when and how much you are changing a setting—but it also means that you cannot adjust the controls while recording or you will hear clicking on your track.

Since there weren't any built-in effects, I used the effects loop to attach a few favorite pedals (Jim Dunlop Crybaby wah-wah, BOSS digital delay) and found things working as expected. This is a comfortable way to work—I didn't have to learn any new programming "secrets", since I was using the stompboxes I already knew intimately, and my normal sound was easily integrated into the PSA's setup.

Guitar-tracking coolness...

Since I was pretty excited about the sound, I was anxious to drop some tracks into my DAW. Using the XLR outputs, I piped the audio into my Pro Tools system (Digi 002R and Pro Tools LE 7) for some quick tracking. I was immediately struck with the presence of this system. I double-tracked a pair of rhythm tracks using the "Pantera" preset, and then slightly altered the "Hendrix" preset to suit my soloing needs. The speaker cones were practically jumping out of the bins, and the track *roared*.

I don't think that I've gotten electric guitar sounds this good out of any recording front-end I've tried, and not just for shredding metal—many of the presets provide good starting points for warm jazz and robust bluesy sounds, proving that the PSA is as versatile as the player connected to it.


...and non-guitar-tracking coolness

Tech 21 suggests that the PSA is as useful in live situations as in the studio, and I would have to agree. In addition to its convenient size and great sound, its preset system is a natural for MIDI footswitch use. If you already have a MIDI-based effects rig, you can map the PSA's preset selection to match your existing presets: for example, you can have your effects pedal's MIDI program 14 map to the PSA's program 25. This takes a little setup work, but the function is well organized.

There is also a full set of bass-oriented presets that are as juicy (if not as numerous) as the guitar sets. They ranged from tight SVT emulations to full-blown growlers (try presets 33 and 38 if you have any questions), and were also definite winners when recorded. For a home studio multi-instrumentalist, the addition of bass setups is literally money kept in the bank.

Conclusion

As you probably can tell, I was blown away by the sound and flexibility of the Tech 21 PSA-1.1. It's not a do-everything box—you still need to use your

stomp boxes and floor pedals to build a complete guitar rig. But in my book, the PSA is highly recommended for the serious tone freak. 

Price: \$875

More from: Tech 21 USA, Inc., 790 Bloomfield Ave., Clifton, NJ 07012. 973/777-6996, www.tech21nyc.com.

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