

GEAR Roundup

TECH 21 BLONDE

Tech 21's SansAmp Character series features four classic guitar amp emulators and the VT Bass Character pedal. Each pedal sports the same control set—Level, Mid, Low, High, Character, and Drive—as well as fancy silk-screened graphics rendered in the style of the amp the pedal is emulating. Designed to be run in front of an amp, in an amp's effects loop, or plugged directly into a mixer, these boxes are sneaky powerful.

They also sport active EQ for maximum tweakability and enough insane output and gain to possibly warrant a "warning" sticker. The Blonde (\$195 retail/\$149 street) is Tech 21's take on classic Fender amps, and as with all of the Character Series pedals, dialing it in really hinges on what you're plugging into. For example, running it in front of a Fender Deluxe Reverb, I found it took some time to tailor the treble and midrange response as the ranges are incredibly vast. Also, the Character control affects everything from frequency response to attack and gain. So using the Blonde as a traditional stompbox is do-able—in fact, there are some cool tones to be had in this configuration. But the Blonde shines much brighter when you run it into an amp's effects loop (thus bypassing the amp's EQ and preamp). In the loop of my Reverend Goblin 5-15, the Blonde's Fender voicing became way more apparent. I was able to elicit excellent approximations of a funky Champ cranked and on the verge of meltdown, a cleanish Super Reverb, or a tweed Deluxe turned up halfway for some sweet, singing tones. I also ran the Blonde through Tech 21's Power Engine 1x12 with equally impressive results. The Blonde also



reacted wonderfully to changes in my guitar's volume, cleaning up nicely as I backed it off. There is a ton of distortion on tap (tons more than any classic Fender amp), but high settings of the Drive control tended to get a bit silly with too much noisy distortion. I then plugged the Blonde straight into my Mac PowerBook (using a 1/4" to 1/8" adapter) and the Blonde excelled, giving me all of the aforementioned tones, and it really shows off its musical sounding speaker simulation, which is based on a vintage 12" Jensen. The speaker simulation can't be turned off, which explains why the Blonde is trickier to dial in as a trad distortion box in front of your amp. But it sounds killer in three different configurations, and there aren't many stompboxes that can say that.

KUDOS Powerful controls help shape some classic Fender amp tones.
CONCERNS Can be tough to dial in when running in front of an amp.
CONTACT Tech 21, (973) 777-6996; tech21nyc.com.

TECH 21 BRITISH

The British (\$195 retail/\$145 street) aims to deliver classic Marshall tones from the JTM45 Bluesbreaker to late '60s plexis to '70s metalface amps and later models like the JCM800. The British's speaker simulation is based on the classic Celestion Greenback, and like the Blonde, the pedal reacts quite differently depending on how you're using it. In front of a Fender Deluxe Reverb, this Brit took some taming—mostly in the treble frequencies, as they could get very spiky. Running in an effects loop or plugging into a P.A., the British easily conjured many of the classic tones it promises. Thanks to the



Character control, you are afforded the softer, midrange-laden plexi tone, as well as the harder-edged JCM800-type sounds. Like the Blonde, there is enough distortion to choke a horse, so discretion is advised. But the pedal cleans up wonderfully when you lighten your picking attack, and it does deliver some classic U.K. amp tones. Cheers.

KUDOS Classic Marshall flavors in an analog stompbox.

CONCERNS Can be tough to dial in when running in front of an amp.

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TECH 21 CALIFORNIA

The California (\$195 retail/\$149 street) is Tech 21's tribute to Mesa/Boogie, and like the other Character pedals, it takes you through a veritable sonic family tree of the company's amplifiers. As you turn up the Character control, you visit a clean-toned Mark I, a revved up Mark II, as well as Mesa's latter-day legend, the Dual Rectifier. Anyone who has played a Boogie knows that knob twiddling is part of the journey, and to that end, the California took a bit of finessing to get what I wanted out of it. The

clean tones are muscular and clear, and the speaker simulation—based on a high-wattage 12" Electro-Voice—keeps things from sounding too gnarly when running direct. I dug the fluted Sanatana-type lead tones, as the Mid control allowed me to dial in even more squawk with my Telecaster. The California does an admirable job in copping the dense crunch of the Rectifier amplifiers, and these tones even cleaned up a bit as I backed off my guitar's volume. Tech 21 did a good job of cramming over 30 years of distinctive tones in a little box.

KUDOS Thick clean tones and singing lead sounds rife with Boogie's classic midrange character.

CONCERNS None.

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**TECH 21
LIVERPOOL**

Tapping into the hallowed Vox AC30 mojo ain't easy. The extended, slicing treble response mixed with a rich midrange chime is a tone to behold for sure. That's why I was a bit surprised that the Liverpool (\$195 retail/\$145 street) was the easiest of the four Character boxes to dial in. As a D.I. or in the effects loop of an amp, I conjured up clean tones that flaunted much of the AC30's trademark jangle. As you turn the Character control up the tones slowly morph from early clean-toned George Harrison to Brian May's over-the-top sustain.



The medium crunch tones are also lovely, with just a touch of harmonic hair surrounding the notes (again, watch the Drive control, as high settings will get out of control quick), and I was also impressed with the myriad funky, lo-fi textures I was able to pull out of the Liverpool, making it a supremely musical and versatile tool.

KUDOS Imparts some of that AC30 magic in an analog box, and more.

CONCERNS None.

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