

Tech 21 SansAmp Character Series VT Bass

BY BILL LEIGH

TECH 21 SANSAMP VT BASS

List \$195

Street \$150

Pros Tons of tubey tones, a variety of overdrives, and a powerful EQ

Cons None

The Bottom Line Massive sounds meet potent tone shaping.

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FOR ABOUT TEN YEARS, “AMP MODELING” has ruled the roost of gear buzzwords, as the emergence of digital technology has given us players access to multiple virtual amp rigs, by way of gadgets and software. Digital isn’t the only way to get a big amp sound from a small box, though: Tech 21 started emulating amps nearly 20 years ago, well before the digital revolution. That’s when Andrew Barta created the innovative SansAmp, a solid-state device that mimics tube amplification for stompbox tone-shaping or direct recording. Five new SansAmp Character Series pedals are the latest in a long line of descendants from the original SansAmp. Four emulate specific guitar amps, but the Character Series VT Bass, which models you-probably-know-what, is the one for you-certainly-know-who.

It’s the CHARACTER knob that gives this stompbox series both its name and its, well, character. Each pedal’s eponymous pot pans through a choice of amp sounds, affecting frequency response, attack, and drive to produce a specific amplifier’s sonic sensation. With the VT Bass, setting CHARACTER before 12 o’clock aims for the powerful Ampeg SVT sound, around 12 noon it aspires to the tube warmth of Ampeg’s ’60s studio staple, the B-15 “flip-top,” and dialing up afternoon clock positions promises a range of distorto-crunch. The DRIVE knob acts as each amp’s input gain would, pushing the virtual preamp and eventually pouring on the overdrive. SVT-like speaker simulation is part of sonic sauce as well.

I stuck the VT Bass in front of an SWR Red-head and a Genz Benz Shuttle 6.0, sometimes bypassing the amps’ preamps by plugging into their effect returns. I also recorded it direct via a computer-recording interface. The CHARACTER control deftly delivered a full menu of meat, especially the broad, beefy SVT tones for which it’s reasonable to assume the pedal is named. A bit of DRIVE boost added wooliness to the note attack, and more drive brought on a monstrous and menacing growl, especially when I dug in with a pick. Turning CHARACTER past 12 o’clock, the grinding overdrive sounds went from tube-like fuzz to cutting buzz-saw crunch. Putting down the pick, the flip-top setting was satisfyingly Motown-like, with the DRIVE control adding a little extra hair on the front of the note. All the tones were thick and filling through an amp, but I really loved it for recording direct. That’s where that sweet, fat tube sound made a huge, track-filling difference.

Between all the settings there are plenty of scrumptious tube overdrive sounds, but the VT Bass is far more than a fuzz box. It also offers big, clean tones, and thick yet fuzz-free tubey tumescence. The three deliciously sensitive EQ knobs are potent tone-shapers; you don’t have to tweak them much for substantive results. Small knob turns created distinct differences, which made it easy to dial up a giant garden of goodness. At rehearsals, I found it easy to match my bypassed sound, which I could then use as a starting point for constructing a specific sonic contrast.

The pedal itself was rugged, with sturdy jacks and pots, and Tech 21’s quiet, soft-actuating footswitch. I get a little nervous about long, thin battery leads, even though they’re very common in stompboxes. For a clumsy oaf like me, they just seem so vulnerable to the accidental yank. Unlike most other SansAmp bass products, there’s no XLR jack for recording direct, but most audio interfaces in project and home studio—where you’d really want that big rig vibe without the big rig—have instrument inputs or q " line-level jacks, both of which the VT Bass can handle just fine.

The Character Series VT Bass has a definite bias toward rock sounds, and if overdrive is your thing, you’ll find a cornucopia of tube-like flavors. However, this nifty little tone twaker is rather versatile, and its big sounds might surprise you.

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TECH SPECS

- Jacks** ¼" input, ¼" unbalanced output
- Controls** LEVEL, LOW (± 12 dB @ 125 Hz), MID (± 12 dB @ 500 Hz), HI (± 12 dB @ 3.2 kHz), CHARACTER, DRIVE
- Input impedance** 1M Ω
- Output impedance** 1k Ω
- Power source** 9-volt battery, or 9VDC optional power supply (Tech 21 DC2, \$12.95)
- Dimensions** 4½" x 3½" x 2"
- Weight** 0.4 lbs
- Made in** U.S.A.
- Warranty** One year limited