

Tech 21 amp combo

Price: £225 Way more than a practice amp, Tech 21's latest combo is a session player's tool kit for every occasion

THE ORIGINAL SANSAMP direct-recording preamp sparked something of a revolution as the first stomp-box-sized guitar preamp with true direct-to-desk capability. Its deliverance of high quality emulated valve tones with a minimum of fuss, found it a home in numerous studios – and guitarist's gig-bags – all over the world. Since then, Tech 21 has been refining and experimenting with their formula, producing some clever products along the way, such as the GT2 pedal and the Trademark 60 combo.

The Trademark 10, on review here, combines the styling of its bigger brother with some of the GT2 pedal features – the result is

a highly portable and flexible combo with capabilities way beyond run of the mill practice amp expectations.

Size is everything

No bigger than a box of cornflakes and only slightly heavier, the 10 is nevertheless immaculately styled and presented with all the panache of its big brother. The particle board cabinet is neatly covered in heavyweight Tolex, and the removable, white-piped basket weave speaker grille adds a touch of class, as does the chunky leatherette handle.

The electronics are contained inside a simple but sturdy open

The rivals

• Peavey Blazer Transtube	£99
• Pignose Hog 30	£149
• Crate CX15R	£169
• Laney LC15R	£234

ended tray, with the upwards facing control panel mounted on a smart brushed aluminium fascia. The circuit board is equally impressive – heavy duty glass epoxy, double sided and through plated with extensive use of miniature components.

Surface-mount is a relatively new technology which allows designers to pack more discrete components into ever-decreasing board sizes – the tags are

pressed against the board

Spec check

TRADEMARK 10 COMBO
PRICE: £225 (including cover)
ORIGIN: USA **TYPE:** Solid state combo, with multiple preset EQ function **OUTPUT:** 10W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 365mm (w) x 335mm (h) x 205mm (d)
WEIGHT: (kg/lb) 7/14
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: One **CONTROLS:** Preamp Drive, Amp/Mod./Speaker slider switches, Low/Mid/High EQ, Reverb, Master Volume
FOOTSWITCH: No
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Accutronics spring reverb, Sansamp XLR balanced direct recording output with ground lift switch (loudspeaker compensated), series FX loop, eight ohm extension output, headphones socket
OPTIONS: Power Engine 60 1 x 12 powered cabinet £295, 2 x 12TM extension cabinet £279, 4 x 12TM extension cabinet £629 **RANGE**
OPTIONS: Trademark 60 combo (£499)
CONTACT: Rocky Road 01494 535333
WEB: www.tech21nyc.com



Not much bigger than a cornflakes packet, but just as effective at waking you up in the morning

surface and then soldered to it in one operation. Expensive computer controlled hardware is needed to do this as people can't work accurately with this size. And while surface-mount technology is commonplace (wristwatches and personal stereos, for example, and a few add-on guitar circuits from the likes of fishman and EMG), this is the first time we've seen it used in a guitar amp.

There's also a mystery component: an unmarked slab of epoxy about 30mm square and 3mm thick. Now, given the obvious costs involved in developing this board I don't blame Tech 21 for keeping a secret or two and the exceptional PCB quality means solder-joint failure on this amp is going to be as unlikely as a lottery jackpot.

The control panel is

Solid-state evolution

IN THE PAST TEN YEARS OR SO, the evolution of solid-state technology has changed a lot of people's thinking. Using sophisticated multi-stage equalisation in conjunction with modern current feedback devices, it's possible to create a 'tranny' amp that responds in a guitar-friendly way, mimicking, to a greater or lesser extent, valve behaviour.

It's also worth remembering that most recorded guitar sounds receive a fair amount of treatment at mixdown with high-end digital reverb, compressors and EQ

modules and the like, so the final result is often substantially different to a valve amplifier's original signal.

Products like Tech 21's Trademark 10 have a somewhat 'ready recorded' sound that's different from the pure valve tone of a Vox AC30 or a Marshall JTM45 for example, but a lot closer to the way those amps might sound when mixed into a piece of music by a producer in a studio.

Digital modelling may be the latest buzzword in amplifier design, but there's still plenty of mileage in analog solid-state



technology, and Tech 21 products are right at the cutting edge.

Web-enabled readers can hear a Trademark 10 being put through its paces at www.tech21ny.com. It's a brief but impressive demo that proves you don't always need valves for hot guitar sounds.

deceptively simple. Next to a single input socket we have a box which contains a Drive knob, followed by three sliding switches which are labelled Amp, Mod and Speaker – the same arrangement as the GT2 pedal. These are followed by a trio of knobs for low, mid and high tone control, and master controls for reverb and output volume.

Underneath the chassis are more goodies. In addition to jack outputs for an external loudspeaker and headphones, there's a pair of send/returns for the series FX loop. A balanced XLR direct output (with a handy ground-lift switch) utilises the original Sansamp speaker-compensated circuit, allowing you to get an authentic cabinet sound simply by plugging into a mixing desk. No mic's and no deafened neighbours.

Just like the GT2 pedal, setting up the Trademark 10 is a doddle

– you only need a fleeting glimpse of the manual to get up and running.

The key to this amp's flexibility lies in how you set those three slider switches: the Amp switch defines the basic character, with three settings marked Tweed, British and Calif giving you Tech21's interpretation of vintage Fender, Marshall/AC30 and Mark series Boogie tonality.

The Mod switch allows you to play with gain structure – again there are three settings labelled Clean, Hi Gain and Hot, and the third slider lets you change the overall EQ to reflect different speaker types – US and UK are referenced to the extended low range of the Electrovoice EVM and the bright crunchy Celestion Greenback, with the Flat option giving you the untweaked tone of Tech 21's own loudspeaker.

Sounds

We initially tried the sample

settings on the handy 'quick-start' card and were instantly impressed by the accuracy and clarity of the sounds, especially AC/DC (British/Hi Gain/UK), which went straight to Angus heaven within seconds of plugging in. Using the Drive control in conjunction with the Mod switch opens the door to an expansive range of highly-useable clean and distorted tones, and the Trademark does the just-on-the-edge, slightly-clipped, sound better than almost all other solid-state amps.

The tone controls are powerful too. Like many solid state designs they boost and cut, whereas a typical valve EQ only cuts, but a sensible choice of bandwidths keeps the tone sweet unless you really push things to extremes.

The eight-inch loudspeaker is capable of serious bass response too. It's no surprise that unlike some small combos, this really is

a specially designed unit unique to Tech 21.

As a result it has none of the boxiness usually associated with small drivers.

The actual Sansamp function (the name, in case you didn't know means without amp), is still one of the best loudspeaker emulators money can buy, but let's not forget the flexibility of conventional miking. With any half decent condenser

microphone there's a whole new range of sounds to be had at levels that won't peel the paint. Imagine a cranked stack being recorded at conversation volume, with hiss and hum levels low enough to make noise gates redundant.

The reverb circuit is also very nicely tuned and totally noise-free. There's a brilliant Peter Green 'Supernatural' tone which took less than two minutes to nail, using the original recording as a reference.

Impressed or what? This isn't just an amp, it's a Swiss army knife of tone. And the addition of the Sansamp circuit, and an FX loop, opens up the possibilities for all kinds of hook-ups, both live and in the studio.

The '10's tonal clarity and lack of background noise is exceptional and immediate, making it perfect for studio/session work. Believe it or not, owning one will cost you a paltry £225, and for that you also get a cover and a well written manual. It's hardly surprising that, according to the UK importer, Tech21 can't make these amps fast enough to satisfy the current demand. Buy one quickly – before the mistake is realised and you find another fifty quid slapped on the price!

Nick Guppy

Click, slide, push for instant Angus heaven

**TRADEMARK 10**

BUILD QUALITY	●●●●●
FEATURES	●●●●●
SOUND	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●
VERDICT	●●●●●

WE LIKED Groundbreaking design, ultra low noise, TB sound

WE DIDN'T LIKE Fiddly speaker grille removal