



TRADEMARK: 120 COMBO
PRICE: £899
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Analogue solid-state three channel combo with stereo output stage
OUTPUT: 2 x 60W (Stereo) RMS
DIMENSIONS: 475 (h) x 650 (w) x 275mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 23/50
CABINET: Particleboard with ply baffle
LOUDSPEAKER: Two Tech 21 Special Design
CHANNELS: Three
CONTROLS: Each channel features drive, three-way voice switch, low, mid and high channel level, Master section: reverb, boost and master output level controls
FOOTSWITCH: Six-way footswitch (included) selects channel, toggles reverb, effects loop and boost functions
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Series FX loop (mono send, stereo return), external speaker and headphone sockets, dual SansAmp speaker emulated line outs with ground lift switch, Accutronics three-spring reverb
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The Trademark series starts with the Trademark 10 (£299), then there's the Trademark 60 (£599). Tech 21 also offer acoustic amps with the Bronzewood Acoustic (£599)
Rocky Road
 01494 535333
www.tech21nyc.com

Tech 21 Trademark 120 combo £899

Tech 21's solid-state-of-the-art answer to the latest digital craze proves there's still plenty of life to be had with analogue **by Nick Guppy**

With digital modelling commanding more than its fair share of attention of late, it's worth remembering there are other types of amp out there. And when it comes to solid, state-of-the-art, you can count Tech 21 as one of the few manufacturers who really know how to make op-amps sing like valves. Andrew Barta's initial success happened with the highly successful SansAmp direct recording preamp, which was one of the first of its kind to produce highly realistic amp tones direct to tape. The SansAmp remains one of the best direct-recording preamps on the market, and it's no surprise that in recent years the same technology has been popping up in amps too.

The Trademark 120 is the big, big brother to the little Trademark 10, which won us over a while back with its Swiss army-knife approach to tone. This time though, it's more of a double-barrelled howitzer in a deep, but

compact cabinet holding a pair of Tech 21's special 12-inch loudspeakers. Like all Tech 21 products, the Trademark 120 is immaculate and stylish in its presentation, with a cream-piped basket weave grille that lends a touch of vintage appeal.

One of the advantages of a bigger cab is that it can hold a bigger chassis, and the Trademark 120's internals have the same high-quality PCBs with an emphasis on surface-mount design – unusual for an all-analogue guitar amp, but nonetheless reliable. The output devices are mounted centrally, around a massive finned heat-sink that sits just below the grille in the control panel. The overall impression is of an extremely well sorted and robust design that Tech 21 have obviously put a lot of effort into.

The Trademark's brushed stainless-steel control panel is home to three channels, with identical controls: drive, low, mid, high and level. A small three-way switch in each channel set lets you choose Tweed, British or Californian voicing. We also get an overall master section with controls for reverb, boost and master level.

Around the back, there's more evidence of the versatility we've come to expect from Tech 21. Here we have a stereo power stage delivering 60W to each speaker, combined with a pair of loudspeaker-emulated balanced XLR line outputs. Then there's a mono

in/stereo out effects loop as well as a pair of external speaker connections and a headphone socket. The back panel is also home to the Trademark's footswitch jack. The very useful footswitch comes with the amp and as well as selecting channels, lets you toggle reverb, effects loop and boost functions. Like some modern Fender amps, clever design – probably using voltage sensing – means that no special multi-core cables are needed to hook up this foot controller. All you need is a guitar or speaker lead to access all six functions – a neat touch, which makes up for the lack of duplicate channel switches on the control panel.

SOUNDS: The first thing that's evident on switch-on is that for a dual 60-wattier this is a very loud amp, and we suspect Tech 21's speakers have a lot to do with this. Some 'own brand' loudspeakers are a budget cop-out, but in this amp – just like the Trademark 10 – they're a crucial part of the design and make a considerable contribution to the overall tonality. Incidentally, we tried other cabs and drivers, but the Trademark's internal speakers delivered by far the best results.

Mains hum, footswitch clicks and hiss are virtually non-existent too, as you'd expect on an amp in this price bracket. The SansAmp-emulated XLR-20dB outputs were a breeze to set up: flat EQ on the desk with a little low cut

TECH 21 TRADEMARK TEST RESULTS	
Build quality	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★☆
Sound	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★☆☆

WE LIKED Punchy, dynamic valve-friendly tones, and easy to dial in despite massive tonal range

WE DISLIKED Some extra reverb and effects loop switching options could have been the icing on the cake

Once the Trademark is dialled in, it's easy to forget that there aren't any valves inside that chassis. It has the same warm, vocal quality you'd expect from a valve circuit



There is certainly plenty to choose from on this Trademark's control panel



The 120's versatility is also evident around back, where there's a jack for the footswitch

at 75Hz is all you need for a very convincing mid-d-up sound.

The Trademark 120's three channel voicings fall more or less in line with what you would expect from their titles. A bright, jangly clean sound in Tweed mode gives way to a brash and dynamic Texas blues-style lead as the gain is wound up, with plenty of grit and crunch for the SRV brigade. This voice also had the best 'just on the edge' distortion effect, with a pleasing touch-sensitivity that rivals some valve circuits. The British voice has a darker mid-range with a lot more gain on tap; it proves just perfect for AC/DC riffing at medium drive settings or Gary Moore-ish leads at higher levels. Californian mode delivers all the blistering, creamy sustain anyone could ask for. These last two can be used as clean channels; but we felt that they tended to sound better with the gain wound up.

Combined with those voice switches, the tone controls are the key to getting

the best sounds out of this amp. The tone controls are active, which means you can boost as well as cut, and there's a lot of range to play with. The manual suggests you start with the knobs centred, pointing straight up, and move them a little at a time. This worked, but you can overcook things at extreme settings and the majority of the best tones were within the middle third of the tone control's travel.

The master boost function adds a lot to the Trademark's versatility. It lets you preset a second, higher volume level and switch from one to the other without affecting distortion or tone settings. So, in reality, each channel has rhythm/solo capability if that's how you want to use it.

The spring reverb has plenty of depth and level to cover any requirement, although we felt the reverb tone was a little too bright. But that's subjective and many players will probably prefer a brighter reverb

anyway. The absence of onboard digital effects means you have the flexibility to pick and choose ones that sound right for you. The Trademark's -20dB loop level favours stompbox-type devices, and although it's quiet enough we would like to have seen a +4dB switch to punch more level into pro/semi-pro rack effects. The loop can be switched in and out from the floor controller, which is a great plus, although adding an in/out loop and reverb preset for each channel would have been the icing on the cake – could be a missed opportunity.

Verdict

Compared to its UK and European competitors the Trademark 120 isn't cheap. However, all Tech 21 products are designed for, and aimed at, the professional end of the market, with both tone and build quality to match.

This is a highly versatile and great-sounding amplifier, which loses nothing by lacking the effects and preset functions common to most digital modelling designs. The dynamic power and sheer quality of sound is also a match for many valve amps, and the amp features a tonal range that no valve circuit can touch.

As you would expect, the best sounds need a little work to find. However, once the Trademark is dialled in it's easy to forget there aren't any valves inside that chassis – it has the same warm, vocal quality you'd expect from a valve circuit, and it's built to take professional tour-level pounding without any stress to components or players.

Definitely a worthy addition to the Trademark range, and a 'must audition' for any player looking for a credible alternative to valves. **B**

Tech 21 Trademark 120 combo

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

The rivals

Fender Stage 160	£549
Marshall AVT275	£560
Peavey Special 212S TT	£629

Marshall's AVT275 is the top model in a world-beating amp range, with versatility, power and tone way beyond its price tag. Peavey's Special is one of the loudest solid-state amps you can buy, and the Transube circuit is one of the best analogue valve emulations. Fender's Stage 160 lacks some of the finesse of its valve brothers, but is nevertheless solid, reliable and loud – what more could you need?