

Guitarist

Tech 21 Character Pedals **£149 each**



Despite the digital modelling revolution, Tech 21 has stuck to its analogue guns; and this range applies the SansAmp technology to replicate various amp brands **by Adrian Clark**

We guitarists seem to have tribal instincts, as you'll see if you ever go up to a group of guitarists in a pub and say "Strat or Les Paul, then?" Opinions will become more and more polarised as the discussion progresses, and don't even think to mention Free Bird versus Stairway To Heaven! These polarised opinions can also be found in the world of amp tones, where you'll find a dedicated tribe of valve amp purists on one side of the fence, scowling at the geeky amp modelling futurists on the other side. The twain occasionally meets, but don't bank on it.

However, there is a middle ground, and we're often guilty of neglecting it. Since 1989, Tech 21 of New York City has been ploughing its own little furrow in the quest for the perfect guitar tone. The company's SansAmp technology emulates the sound of valve amps and mic'd speakers,

allowing you to record realistic guitar tones directly; but it's analogue, not digital.

Also, unlike many of the digital modellers, the SansAmp products have never been overly specific about their sounds. Sometimes the ultra-precise descriptions of the modelled sounds and their real-life archetypes can be off-putting, leading players to choose tones according to the most stylistically appropriate names on the patch list, rather than just, er, listening!

That brings us back to the middle ground. Each pedal in Tech 21's new-for-2008 Character range is designed to emulate the classic sounds of a particular brand of amplifiers, but without any model-specific settings. Instead, they all have the same set of easily understood controls, including the eponymous Character control, which moves through the range of 'flavours' associated with that amp company. Not only that, but there's a Character pedal purely for bassists!

Before looking at the specific pedals, let's look at what they all

have in common. The six controls are the same for all pedals in the range, and the level, drive and three-band EQ controls should be familiar to most people. The Character control is a bit different, and its exact behaviour depends on the pedal. It changes the overall tonal response, attack and drive characteristics, emulating not only a range of classic amps, but also allowing you to find unique tonal shades in between.

The Character pedals all have speaker simulation appropriate to their respective amps, but they can also be used as standard overdrive/preamp pedals. There's a mono input and output, and the pedals can be powered by either a single 9V battery (which should last around 100 hours) or a suitable DC adaptor.

On a visual level we're not quite sure about the 'Ye Olde Amp' graphics on the pedals, which loses a lot by being two-



dimensional prints. Still, the graphics make it possible to distinguish between five pedals that otherwise appear identical.

Sounds

Sonically, of course, each pedal in the range is very different. So let's plug in, starting close to home...

British

There are several well-known British amp manufacturers, but not surprisingly this pedal is all about Marshall. With the speaker simulation tuned to the sound of the Celestion Greenback, the Character control takes you through some classic rock history.

At the lowest Character settings, the warm overdrive tone is based on the JTM45 (as famously used by Eric Clapton on the Bluesbreakers album) and as

Rivals

Tech 21 has ploughed virtually a lone furrow with its analogue amp simulation technology, so the most obvious rivals all use digital modelling. The **Line 6 Floor POD** (£175) provides a good selection of the modelling pioneer's signature sounds, with a built-in expression pedal; and if you're on a budget, the **Pocket POD** (£79) has a beginner-friendly interface. If you need a range of overdrive sounds, with or without amp sims, the **BOSS OD-20** (£149) features 22 models. **Blackstar** doesn't use modelling but its HT pedals add a valve, boast speaker emulated output and offer the patent-applied-for tone shaping ISF (Infinite Shape Feature) control for voicing different amp flavours. Try the **HT-Dual DS-2** (£139).

Turning up [the British Character control] to about 80 per cent gives a great 'Van Halen I' sound



The British pedal is all about that classic rock Marshall tone



Step back in time with the Blonde's Character control

you turn up the control, the mid-range frequencies gain some dominance along with the overdrive possibilities... we're now in 'Plexi' territory. There's still a decent amount of bite, as you'd expect from a Marshall, and the amount of overdrive available is generous though not extreme.

So, if you wanted more of a 'modded Plexi' sound, but the drive is already up full, you'd need to add a pedal, right? Not necessarily. The beauty of the Character control is that it alters the drive characteristics as well as the overall EQ. Turning up to about 80 per cent gives a great 'Van Halen I' sound – thinner than the original 'Plexis', but with a warm, woody mid-range that sits perfectly in a mix and works well with high-output humbuckers. Backing off on the mid and boosting the high control takes you into more of a JCM800 sound and we just can't resist a quick blast through the Phantom Of The Opera riff!

The maximum Character setting adds some extra presence, designed to emulate Marshall's

1970s 'Metalface' amps. We assume Tech 21 means the post-1974 JMP models, when the circuitry changed from the 'Plexi' design. Whatever the intention may have been, the sound is certainly tighter and brighter, and a modest drive setting puts you right into AC/DC territory.

Blonde

From one huge name in guitar amps to another. While there's a recognised 'Fender tone', there are distinct sonic differences between amps of different periods in the company's history. Unlike the other pedals in the range, the Blonde has a Character control that takes you backwards through time. With that in mind, let's harness the lightning and channel it into the flux capacitor!

With the Character control below 50 per cent, the pedal specialises in those crystal clean sounds associated with Blackface and Silverface amps (from the mid-sixties onwards). Plugging in a Strat, the sound is crisp and bright, but with a perfect balance to the lower frequencies so it doesn't sound at all thin. You can get a touch of overdrive with this setting, but mostly to add extra bite. Unlike the other pedals in the range, the Blonde's mid-range control operates at 1kHz rather than 500Hz, and this can be heard in the extra bite and attack.

Turning up brings you more into the Blonde era (Tolex-covered 'piggyback' amps from the early sixties) and then the Tweed era of the fifties. The available overdrive increases first, and then there's a prominent mid-range boost, like the real thing. At the maximum Character setting things get a bit more snarly and aggressive, described by Tech 21 as "Ted Nugent style."

California

While much of the Mesa/Boogie reputation is now built on high-gain Dual and Triple Rectifier



amps, the company's origins lie in Randall Smith's modified Fender amps. At low Character settings, Tech 21's California pedal is designed to emulate the powerful clean sounds of the 1980 Boogie MkII. Pushing up the Character and increasing the drive gives the classic lead sounds of the earlier Boogie amps.

By the time you get to 50-70 per cent on the Character control, the pedal is capable of plenty of those thick lead tones typical of the MkII and MkIV Boogie amps. If you want the sustain but without so much of the Santana-style thickness, just pull the Character control down to 50 per cent, there's still plenty of overdrive.

The top end of the Character range takes us into Rectifier territory. Cutting a little mid-range gives a huge metal sound, but bear in mind that SansAmp controls are always fairly wide-ranging, so don't cut too much. To retain the tightness of the sound, avoiding mushy fuzziness, you



The California emulates the sounds of Mesa/Boogie through the ages



really have to work with the drive, low and mid controls together, fine-tuning them for the best balance.

Liverpool

Although Vox amps were never made in Liverpool, plenty of the music from that city was built upon the Vox sound, so this pedal is appropriately named. The old Vox amps are known for their ability to produce loud clean sounds, so if this is what you need, keep the Character and drive controls low, and you'll find plenty of headroom from the level control. The pedal will distort on this sort of setting, but the overdrive has quite a smooth, woody character – a bit like an AC15 on full volume.

The first third of the Character control's sweep introduces the unmistakable eyebrow removal potential of the AC30 Top Boost. Go further, and warmer mid-range frequencies are gradually introduced, more suited to lead playing. We were able to get some nice fat blues lead sounds with a Les Paul using this setting.

Pushing the Character control all the way up adds more edge to the lead tone, and this is intended to emulate Brian May's sound. Of course, Brian's various tones have a lot to do with his guitar and the treble booster he also uses, but it's

possible to get a decent approximation of his nasal, singing sustain with the Liverpool pedal. Again, you have to remember that the controls are very powerful; best results are gained by making small adjustments on all controls until you find the right balance.

VT Bass

The Ampeg SVT has been one of the most popular bass amps ever since its introduction in 1969, so it makes sense for it to be the sole bass candidate in this range. The

speaker simulation in this pedal is tuned to emulate 10-inch speakers, and the standard SVT's clear, driving sound can be easily accessed in the first 50 per cent of the Character knob's sweep.

Even with the Character control remaining static, we are able to get a huge range of sounds from the pedal. The wide-ranging EQ

controls are great for bass – boosting all three controls results in an exciting 'alive' sound, with a smooth sustain. For a punchy funk tone, we recommend keeping the Character control down to the minimum, adding grit via the EQ and drive controls.

The 50 per cent setting is designed to sound like the B-15

Even with the Character control remaining static, we were able to get a huge range of sounds from the [VT Bass]



Much of the music from Liverpool was built on the Vox sound, hence this pedal's name

'Flip Top' model (so named because the amp could be inverted and stashed inside the speaker cabinet to protect the valves). This setting produces a fatter, more immediate tone with more harmonic complexity. The B-15 is a versatile studio amp, and the direct recording potential of the SansAmp technology makes this a great pedal for the home studio.

Higher Character settings gradually introduce more of a 'clank' to the tone; we don't have a Rickenbacker 4001 to hand, but we suspect that it wouldn't take much effort to produce a great Geddy Lee or Chris Squire sound.

Verdict

For us, the most instantly impressive pedal is the VT Bass, mostly because bass amp simulators are still vastly in the minority compared with their six-string cousins. For the home studio enthusiast who needs a good range of usable bass sounds without the complexity of the bass POD range or the impracticality of mic'ing up a real bass amp, the VT Bass is an absolute gem. In fact, after half an hour of jamming, we have removed the Gaffa tape from our wallet and are offering our



The VT Bass produces a wide range of sounds and the EQ controls are perfect for bass

credit card details to the Tech 21 distributors!

In all honesty, though, the VT Bass just happened to meet the right reviewer at the right time; we'd be happy to own all of these pedals because they're just so

inspiring to use. As distortion, overdrive or boost pedals they work very well and will add a little something extra to most amps, but their real power lies in their direct-recording potential. Some of the sounds have an instantly recognisable SansAmp 'rasp' in the treble, which won't be to everyone's taste, but the EQ controls are very flexible, and it's very easy to create convincing emulations of the real amps.

The lack of presets, effects or other digital fripperies may be off-putting to people brought up on digital modelling units, but as we said above, sometimes – creatively – those things can be counter-productive. Most of the classic guitar and bass sounds of the last 50 years were created with nothing more than the built-in versatility of a single, well-chosen amp. All you need, as The Beatles should have sung, is ears! **G**

The bottom line

Tech 21
Character Pedals

We like: Fantastic tone quality; convincing simulations

We dislike: Absolutely nothing!

Guitarist says: A range of pedals that offer inspiring sounds, they couldn't be easier to use and put analogue firmly back on the map!



Guitarist
GOLD

Tech 21 Character Pedals

PRICE: All £149 each

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Analogue amp simulation pedals, themed by amp manufacturer: Liverpool, British, Blonde, Californian and VT Bass

FEATURES: Can be used with amps or direct signal chains; Character control moves through a range of amps associated with each manufacturer

CONTROLS: Level, mid, Character, drive, low, high

CONNECTIONS: Input jack, output jack
POWER: 9V battery or DC adaptor (not supplied)

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Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

