

# Quick Picks

## TECH 21

### SansAmp RBI

By Myles Boisen

Tech 21's RBI preamp (\$395) is the most recent addition to the company's SansAmp line of amplifier emulators. Housed in a road-worthy, metal, 1U-rackspace chassis, the RBI is essentially a deluxe version of Tech 21's Bass Driver DI pedal. In addition to offering a range of all-analog SansAmp tube-emulation and tone shaping, the RBI includes a switchable effects loop, individually controlled outputs, and buffered XLR and ¼-inch dry outputs.

The solid-state RBI can be used as the front end of a live bass rig or as a DI and preamp for studio bassists, the latter of which will be the focus of this review.

#### Around the Basses

The RBI's front panel features large, easy-to-grasp, and clearly labeled knobs. Adjustable parameters include Drive (preamp gain), Presence (upper harmonic EQ), Blend (direct versus processed signal), Bass (80 Hz +/-12 dB), Mid (1 kHz +/-12 dB), and Treble (3.2 kHz +/-12 dB).

Additional front-panel knobs control gain for the unit's XLR and ¼-inch SansAmp (main) outputs. This setup gives you separate level controls when feeding a bass amp and a mixer. The front panel has a chromed ¼-inch instrument input, a large on-off power switch, a red power-status indicator light, and chrome-plated bumper-style handles. An Active switch with an indicator light lets you turn the RBI circuitry on and off.

#### Back, Back, Back

The rear panel houses a standard IEC power connector, the aforementioned main

outputs, and a host of other I/O choices, including a second ¼-inch input with a 0 dB to -20 dB input-selector switch to facilitate line- and instrument-level signals. (There's a similar level switch for the XLR Output.) There are also Effects-Loop Send and Return jacks, a 50/50 switch that toggles the loop between serial and parallel configurations, and ¼-inch Footswitch In and Out jacks. You can use two RBIs in tandem by connecting the Footswitch Out of one to the Footswitch In of another.

For studio use, the RBI offers a wealth of sonic options that can be used for direct-bass recording and for processing prerecorded bass tracks. Thanks to the various gain controls and level switches, level matching in the studio is a breeze. And with the Blend control turned fully counterclockwise (mixing in none of the drive and EQ sections) and the active circuitry engaged, the RBI adds little tonal coloration or noise.

#### Pinch Hitter

While the RBI can be used effectively for minor tweaks, the real fun lies in beefing up and radically reshaping bass parts. The unit is particularly adept at turning DI tracks into punchy and commanding amplike sounds. Anything from subtle coloration to aggressive overdrive and distortion can be easily dialed in.

When auditioning a handful of master takes from singer and songwriter Vanessa Lowe's *57 Suspect Words* CD, I used the RBI to dramatically improve the recorded output of a high-tech Zon bass. Likewise, when recording direct in the studio using a vintage Fender Precision, the RBI offered virtually unlimited tonal possibilities, with far less knob twisting than I've come to expect from preset-based amp emulators.

This remarkable ease of use is due in part to the apparently wide bandwidth of the RBI's bass EQ. You don't have to work too hard to hear what this control is doing. Often a rotation of a few notches from center makes an audible difference between thunderous and thin.

#### Squeeze Play

I was impressed with the smooth character of the RBI's Drive circuit and its ability to gently compress and squeeze sustain, particularly out of a bass's lower notes. When processing recorded DI tracks, I did find that when I turned the Drive knob past the two o'clock position, the bass signal got a little fuzzy and fret noise was accentuated. But set correctly, you can get a satisfying, clean sound in addition to the more aggressive overdrive and distortion tones the unit can produce.

I'm a fan of running drums, vocals, rhythm loops, and other types of tracks through guitar pedals such as the Tech 21 SansAmp GT2. The RBI's Blend control and the unit's ability to pass clean, line-level signals make it extremely useful for these types of applications.

Overall, the SansAmp RBI scores major-league points for its high-quality sonics, intuitive controls, and multiple I/O options. It "covers the basses" in style, combining elegantly simple operation with total versatility.

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#### Overall EM Rating (1 through 5): 4.5

Tech 21

tel.: (973) 777-6996

email: info@tech21nyc.com

Web: www.tech21nyc.com

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The SansAmp RBI gives recording bassists a wide range of tonal, EQ, and output options.