



Andrew Barta in his office.

TIME BETTER SPENT

Tech 21 Marks 30 Years

By Ward Meeker

Working on guitar amplifiers in the back room of Rogue Music in New York City, Andrew Barta loved spending his days elbow-deep in his craft. All that fixing and modding—which started in his teens—taught him well the inner workings of every type of tweed, plexi, and top-boost used by every style of player.

As a guitarist in several bands, Barta was also aware of just how time-consuming (and frustrating!) it was miking tube amps in a recording studio until they sounded just right.

“By the time everything was ready, there’d

be an hour left to record,” he laughed.

So, he made it his mission to find a way to speed the process. As a student in high school, he’d developed an outboard overdrive preamp, which taught him the differences between an overdrive circuit and how an amp generates natural overdrive. He also investigated ways to simulate various speaker cabinets and researched formulas for creating filters within a circuit. He then squeezed all the elements into a pedal that could quickly and easily patch tube-amp tones directly to a

mixer or PA. Barta showed his “little black box” to some of his amp-shop clients, and was surprised at the positive response. Inspired, he started looking for a way to move the device beyond mere concept. He built a few more on his kitchen table, each taking about two days. Once ready for prime time, he began to shop it around to big-name pedal builders. Nobody bit.

“None of them truly understood what it was or saw the potential,” he said. While repeated rejection was frustrating, for sure, Barta refused to give up on the idea.

Plus, friends and amp clients were constantly reminding him how great it was.

In 1989 he decided to market the device himself.

“I had recently moved into the city from New Jersey and no longer needed a car. So, I sold my Porsche and used the money to start the company. My friend, Dale Krevens, was involved from the start and became my vice president in 1991. She had a background in advertising and marketing and is the one who came up with the name ‘SansAmp.’ Then, we had to figure out a company name—something with ‘tech.’ Then I thought of the number 21 for ‘21st century.’ Being a poker player, I also liked that it’s the winning number for blackjack.”

For the first year, Barta ran his new business and the repair shop at Rogue.

“I had rent to pay,” he said. “And, I had no crystal ball. Plus, Rogue was very helpful in promoting the SansAmp; they’ve been one of our dealers since the start.”

By May of 1990, though, player response to the pedal was vigorous enough that Barta closed the bench at Rogue and moved his tools to a new space at 49th Street and Broadway, chosen specifically to be close to the renowned music stores on 48th.

For three years, the SansAmp was Tech 21’s sole product, and it sold so fast there was never spare inventory.

“Myself and my two employees would build and pack them right into shipping boxes to get them out the door,” said Barta.

While never a stranger to the assembly floor, Barta saw his purpose as “innovator.” That meant a lot of things, including keeping an eye on the guitar-products market. As rack mounts became popular in the early ’90s, he adapted to create the SansAmp RM1, introduced in February of ’92. Today, it’s Tech 21’s version of a collectible.



By the early '90s, Tech 21 had outgrown its original space in New York City and moved to this larger one at 1600 Broadway.



Part of the assembly floor today.

SHOWCASE Builder

"You almost never see them in the used market, and if you do, they command pretty high prices," Barta noted.

Around the same time, he noticed a lot of bass players using a SansAmp.

"There weren't a lot of choices for bass pre-amps or effects, so I thought it made sense for us to offer something specifically for bass, and in late '92 we came out with the SansAmp Bass DI, a dedicated box with adjustable internal controls. At the time, bass players didn't really change up their sound, so it was designed to set and forget."

While the unit sold well, Barta responded to player feedback by building one with controls outside the chassis. The resultant Bass Driver DI was launched in '94, and today remains central to the product line. Later additions like the GT2 are also still popular.

In '95, Tech 21 introduced effects with the XXL pedal, followed by the Trademark Series amps in '96.

While Barta has always run print ads, scored review ink, and lined up an enviable roster of endorsers, he considers Tech 21's growth "mostly organic."

"In the beginning, dealers didn't warm to the SansAmp, which was understandable since it was a new concept," he said. "We spent a lot of

time explaining what it was and what it did. Luckily, once players heard it, they *had* to have one."

What set it so far apart?

"First and foremost, the technology is analog, which has infinite resolution. As good as digital is, it's still limited by resolution and other factors such as latency. It's very important to me that everything I design is useful and doesn't include a bunch of frivolous features that lose their attraction after a couple of days. Plus, if I can't make something unique in some way, or substantially better, I don't see the point."

Thirty years after he rolled the dice on what is now the Sansamp Classic, Barta's company continues to make products with the sole intent of supporting the creative process for pros and amateurs alike, because he believes there are few pursuits as worthwhile as playing music.

"So many things in our world today – video games, for instance – intensify the desire for

instant gratification, which ultimately leaves you empty," he said. "Playing an instrument is the opposite. There's value in developing a skill. It gives you an objective and purpose, and ultimately, confidence and a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. I hope people continue to recognize that and keep practicing and playing." **VG**



Barta with Tech 21 VP Dale Krevens.