



Tech 21: SansAmp Classic

The classic direct guitar and bass front end is back

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Designed by B. Andrew Barta, the original SansAmp was released in 1989 to deliver tube amp-like tones in a compact stompbox design. For over 30 years, the original SansAmp has been a favored industry-standard front end for recording without an amp. Thanks to its realistic emulation of a miked speaker cabinet, the SansAmp sound has found its way onto records in seemingly all genres.

Back by popular demand

After a manufacturing pause in 2016, SansAmp Classic is being reissued in 2021 with its original tone and design. It can be powered with a 9v battery or with a 9v DC barrel connector (standard pedal power will do the trick). I was a bit disappointed to see the 1/4" connectors still located on the sides of the unit instead of a more pedalboard-friendly top-panel connection. There are three input modes on the right-side panel: Lead, Normal, and Bass. The Lead channel is for Marshall-esque tones with emphasized midrange and highs. The Normal input is for MESA/Boogie-inspired tones, and the Bass input works well for Fender amp tonality. Beyond the three input modes, there are eight character controls (on dip switches) and four knobs. There's a cheat sheet for the dip switches printed on the faceplate, but given their small size, they aren't meant to be changed live on the fly; find the shapes that work best for your style and dial in these settings before the gig. The dip switches include Mid-Boost I & II, Low Drive, Clean Amp, Bright Switch, Vintage Tubes, Speaker Edge, and Close Miking.

With the character controls dialed in, the knob controls can shape the sound even further. 'Presence Drive' is for shaping the pre-amp contours in the upper midrange, 'Amp Drive' shapes the power amp contours, and 'High' balances the

top-end EQ (the manual suggests setting this control to maximum for recording). The fourth knob is an output level control.

Stage and studio

While SansAmp Classic certainly has its place on the stage, even fronting an amplifier, I found its tone much more appealing when going direct and 'sans' amp as intended. Using SansAmp as a stompbox is feasible with low 'Amp Drive' levels, but I found that it doesn't stack too well unless the amplifier has ample headroom. In that scenario, it serves well as a channel-switching device, bypassing for clean amp tone and engaging for a dirtier, overdriven tone from the SansAmp.

In the studio, the SansAmp Classic is quite flexible. It plays nicely with other pedals, typically with any gain staging beforehand and time-based effects coming after it. In use, I love the Bass input tone the most; it sounds thick and warm, with a massive bottom end (even too big in some cases). I usually start in the same ballpark as the Stevie Ray presets outlined in the manual. It creates a fantastic Fender tone, especially when paired with a Strat. Engaging the Vintage Tubes dip switch adds a bit of edge, which pairs nicely with the Low Drive switch for that fat Fender tone.

Proper gain staging plays a huge role in capturing authentic tube amp character. I found that having too many pedals



driving the front of SansAmp Classic can make its breakup feel a bit unnatural and crackly. The sweet spot can be achieved by driving its frontend just enough to have an amp-like breakup to it (which doesn't take much!) – just like with a real amp, it can take a bit of fiddling to get the exact tone in your head, but all of the tools needed are certainly on tap.

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When so many digital solutions are available, an elegant, all-analog, zero-latency approach offers many benefits, such as zero latency. Every studio should have at least one of these floating around, as this box is a well time-tested piece of gear. As a longtime SansAmp user, the 2021 Classic reissue is the real deal. SansAmp Classic brings rock-solid amp tones (not just guitar or bass) perfectly suited for the studio and stage. It's incredibly flexible given its small size, and its tones pack a genuine punch. ➔

Price: \$299

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