

no picnic. A hand-held wired remote is included, which simplifies programming to some extent, but you have to navigate layer after layer of hierarchical menus. Even when the confusion clears away, it's still tedious.

The PMC 10 has a jack for controlling non-MIDI devices.

Summary. All of these footcontrollers are well designed and solidly manufactured, and each unit's footswitch action feels good. All support two Continuous Controller pedals. However, each is geared to a different

Footcontrollers let you change patches and MIDI parameters from the floor.

audience. Here's how you decide which one is best for you:

If you use only one MIDI-controllable device and don't expect to expand soon, consider the ART and Zoom units. Not surprisingly, the X-15 works seamlessly with ART SGX-series devices, and the 8050 works well with Zoom's 9030 processor. The X-15 is an astonishing value for anyone who only needs to control one MIDI channel. It includes two Continuous Controller pedals, saving you over \$100 if you plan on purchasing pedals for the other units. The 8050 is smaller, and its C Bank provides somewhat more sophisticated MIDI functions.

If you plan on using more than one MIDI device, Ground Control is easy to use and provides quick gratification. If you need the ultimate in flexibility and are willing to work for it, the PMC 10 is the footcontroller for you.

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Two Tube Amplifier Emulators: SansAmp Rackmount & Award Design Sessionmaster

BY JOE GORE

TECH 21 caused quite a stir when they introduced the SansAmp a couple of years ago. Many players and engineers swear that plugging the \$295 stomp box directly into a PA, mixer, or recording console yields convincing imitations of a wide range of tube amplifier tones.

After much experimentation in professional and home studios, I've come to the admittedly subjective conclusion that while the device delivers an impressive simulation, it doesn't sound exactly like a miked amp, or even an amp recorded through a high-quality speaker emulator. But that's cool—the SansAmp makes attractive and useful sounds with their own unique flavors.

Now Tech 21 has created a rack-mount SansAmp that improves on the original model, though consumers will have to

tened to a half-dozen electrics and a Music Man bass through all three devices, running them into a Mackie 1604 mixer and adding a bit of tube-reverb ambience.

The most difficult thing about describing—or, for that matter, using—these devices is the complex way in which their controls interact. Take the original SansAmp: Each of its eight tiny switches modifies the tonal contours. Suppose, for example, you activate the "vintage tubes" switch for more buzz, but also select "clean amp" to crystallize your tone. Should you expect the two to cancel each other out? Will you get a different sound than when you select neither? Switching between the three global gain modes changes everything, as does tweaking the "presence drive" and "amplifier drive" knobs, not to mention the master output and EQ levels.

The SansAmp Rackmount re-

voke, if not clone, the general sonic characteristics of many different amps. "Buzz" adjusts the perceived breakup of the lower register; "crunch" controls the top end, "punch" the frequencies in between. The knobs still interact in complex ways, but odds are you will be able to capture the sounds you seek much more readily with the Rackmount's more logical implementation. A helpful manual includes suggested settings for approximating many popular amp sounds. Auditioning them makes a superb introduction to the unit, though titles such as "AC30 Beatles Style" and "Roland JC-120 Style" are generously informed by wishful thinking.

The SansAmp Rackmount's refinements include three outputs (-10 and +4dB phone plugs and an XLR out with a trim pot), a rear-panel jack that lets you bypass the SansAmp function with an on/off footswitch (not included), rear-panel "bypass loop" jacks for automatically introducing other signal processing when the SansAmp is switched to bypass mode (virtual channel-switching), and a "live switch" that compensates the overall tone for playing



The Sessionmaster offers some cool sounds but flimsy construction.

judge whether the added features described here justify its \$595 price tag. Meanwhile, Jim Dunlop has just begun to distribute the rack-mountable Sessionmaster, manufactured by England's Award Design and priced at \$399, midway between the two SansAmps.

All three devices belong to the same species: preamp/direct boxes with idiosyncratic EQ functions designed to replicate the tonal characteristics of a tube guitar amplifier in various degrees of overdrive. For this review, I lis-

places the mini-switches with eight readily comprehensible knobs and a bypass button. There's still an overall output level, and a two-band global EQ replaces the original model's single treble control. But the vastly more intuitive overdrive circuitry is the most dramatic improvement on the original design. Two knobs set the instrument input level and the overall amount of overdrive, while three "character controls" sculpt the overdrive effect in various registers. These dials allow you to

through lo-fi enclosures (i.e., guitar cabinets). The external power supply clamps in tight with an XLR-type connector. According to Tech 21, it reduces hum, but lousy luck replacing such a specialized adaptor on short notice if it ever breaks. (The company also points out that both the power supply and connector are available from Radio Shack. Connecting them, however, requires some soldering.) The unit's ultra-rugged metal housing features front-panel pull-

tabs for easy removal from racks.

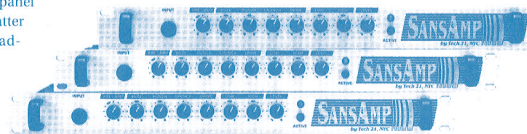
The Sessionmaster's construction is flimsy by comparison; the metal housing is very thin and not tightly sealed against dust. But despite its unpromising exterior, some of the device's sounds, which range from squeaky-clean faux-Fender to face-frying scooped-midrange death tone, rival those of the SansAmps. The Sessionmaster front panel is comparatively simple; there are gain,

output, treble, middle, and bass knobs, plus three push-buttons that gloss the overall gain, bass, and midrange levels. It has instrument- and line-level rear-panel phone-plug outputs, the latter with a stereo jack for headphone listening (both ears in mono, that is). No XLRs, loops, or "live" switch. The power supply is external.

The Sessionmaster's controls are easier to master, but the SansAmp Rackmount's multi-stage, multi-register gain controls provide access to more varied sonic nooks and crannies. At first listen, the Sessionmaster seemed the quieter of the two units. But the SansAmp's noisiest settings are those with the "punch" and "crunch" controls cranked, precisely the sort of fizzy, ultra-present sounds that lie out-

side the Sessionmaster's repertoire. In their most extreme settings—which few will ever

mountability or special features and are willing to pursue sounds with patience and a sense of hu-



SansAmp's Rackmount: A high-ticket version of their popular stompbox.

side—both units produce all manner of awful noises.

Conclusions. The Sessionmaster and both SansAmps are useful recording tools. The SansAmp Rackmount is clearly the superior unit, but if you don't need its extra features and plan to let your unit live a quiet, nondestructive rack life, at least try the Sessionmaster. If you don't care about rack-

mor, your best bet is the original stomp-box SansAmp.

Frankly, all three products seem a bit pricey; for this kind of money, you can purchase a small vintage amp and a Shure microphone or any of several excellent speaker emulators for recording direct with your favorite amp. By all means, investigate these units, but weigh your options with care.

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