

PREMIER Guitar

Tech 21 Fly Rig 5 Review

Matthew Holliman
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Tech 21's original SansAmp opened a world of authentically amp-like tones for space-constrained players. It also seemed to reflect a Tech21 fixation on delivering maximum sounds from small effects. The new Fly Rig 5 multi-effect may be the most complete embodiment of that philosophy yet: It combines Tech 21's SansAmp, Boost DLA delay, Boost RVB reverb, and Hot Rod Plexi distortion/overdrive pedals in a super-compact floor unit that can fit into guitar cases and backpacks.

Fully Stocked Bar

Fly Rig 5 is less than a foot in length and weighs just over a pound, yet its all-metal enclosure feels sturdy. I couldn't view all the components without dismantling the pedal, but was happy to see that Tech 21 doesn't solder the footswitches or knobs directly to the PC board—a cost-saving measure often seen in compact pedals, and one that can result in catastrophic failure.

The controls are divided into three sections, with the SansAmp section in the center. Its controls can look odd at first: A reverb control that would make more sense placed in the DLA delay section is situated between the master level and active EQ controls. That oddity aside, the SansAmp section is easy to navigate. The drive control regulates gain, and the active EQ cuts and boosts lows, mids, and highs.

Combined with the SansAmp section, the plexi channel opens up multiple dimensions of gain. Adding the hot switch unleashes a three-stage beast that can range from rocking to blistering.

The plexi channel delivers the organic, biting overdrive of a vintage Brit amp. It includes an interesting high-end cut function, regulated via the tone control. At its maximum setting, the high-end EQ is what might be called "flat" in a cut/boost setup. From there, you trim high end by turning the control counter-clockwise. The plexi section's hot switch adds up to +21 dB of gain, depending on where you set the hot knob, and it can function independently of the regular plexi switch. Engaging both the hot and plexi switches catapults your tone into crunchy aggression.

The DLA section provides between 28 and 1000 milliseconds of digital delay. It includes a tap-tempo

function, and repeats can be set anywhere from a single echo to near-self-oscillation. Drift is a cool feature that approximates the tape wobble of an Echoplex or Space Echo. It can also deliver cool pitch-shift effects closer to chorus or rotary simulation.

Excellent Effects Array

Using a Fender Twin Reverb (a likely backline partner for a gigging Fly Rig 5 user), I tried summoning the mellowest overdrive sounds first. Clean-boost tones can be a little tough to get, however, since most drive settings result in at least some crunch. Just as on a real amp, heavy drive settings generate some extra noise, which you can hear even when plugged directly into a recording interface.

That said, the SansAmp adds character and body to both the DI'd output and the Twin Reverb at low volumes. Advancing the drive to 2 o'clock gives the Twin surprisingly dynamic tube-like saturation, and heavy picking on a Telecaster induced organic-sounding breakup. The fantastic 3-band EQ is likely to prove invaluable in the studio and onstage. Have an axe with shrill or murky pickups? The SansAmp can tame *and* breathe life into those troublesome transducers.

From Rocking to Blistering

Plugged into a clean Orange OR50, I got much use from the plexi channel, particularly with the SansAmp engaged. By itself, the plexi effect could sound a bit brittle with the Orange and the Twin, but it's easy to massage into shape via the tone control. Combined with the SansAmp section, the plexi channel opens up multiple dimensions of gain. Adding the hot switch unleashes a three-stage beast that can range from rocking to *blistering*.

The plexi channel feels authentically Marshall-like. Not surprisingly, the gain structure is better suited to '70s hard rock than modern metal. But like a classic Marshall, the circuit is highly responsive to the guitar's volume knob setting and your picking dynamics. An over-the-top hot plexi setting softens to a smooth, smoky blues-rock tone with a nudge of your guitar's volume pot.

The DLA section is solid and versatile. It has a convincingly tape-like voice for a digital unit, and does just about everything short of extreme delay times. Slapback sounds are excellent, especially with a dose of reverb from the SansAmp side. Clever use of the drift control in tandem with minimal repeat and time settings creates cool chorus-style modulation.

My only real Fly Rig 5 concern is its compatibility with other stompboxes. If you only need this particular handful of effects, great—you're all set. But what if you plan to add other boxes *after* the Fly Rig5? What if you want the SansAmp to pre-boost your favorite fuzz pedal? You'd probably have to turn off the delay and manually lower the reverb lest you create a gigantic wash only die-hard lo-fi shoegazers could love. The Fly Rig 5 may be designed to be a self-contained as possible, but an effect loop would make the unit more useful to players who require additional pedals.

The Verdict

At \$249, Fly Rig 5 is solid deal, especially considering that a more full-featured standalone SansAmp can cost a couple hundred bucks. The overdrive and distortion sounds work well with single-coils and humbuckers alike, and the excellent active EQ helps you match just about any guitar to any amp. Fly Rig 5 is perfect for the travelling guitarist who loves gain and needs few effects other than delay and reverb.

Ratings

Pros:

Much utility and many tones in a super-small package. Sturdy construction.

Cons:

Can be tricky to use with other effects.

Tones:



Ease of Use:



Build/Design:



Value:

