

The Tone

By Scott Malandrone

You are now crossing over into a land of interactive equalization, light-emitting diodes, and toroidal transformers. A place where tubes and field-effect transistors blend seamlessly together, EQ slopes get squeezed to their sonic limits, and compression circuits tame the wildest beasts. Welcome to the Tone Zone!

The purpose of our tone-tasting mission was simple: we wanted to know which preamps packed the most mouth-watering tones and sound-sculpting capabilities into a rackmountable box. After twiddling some 176 knobs, tweaking 49 graphic-EQ sliders, flicking 24 tone-contouring switches, and cranking 20 master volumes for over a month, we had leveled the playing field. The end result is the most extensive bass-preamp comparison ever assembled.

Why buy a preamp? With so many all-in-one heads available today, why use one of these little guys? There are two good reasons: sound quality and flexibility. Next to a solid-sounding bass, a good preamp can be the most important element in making or breaking your tone. After all, this is

the first stage of amplification your instrument sees (unless you have an onboard active preamp)—skimp here and it probably won't matter how many effects, power amps, or speaker cabinets you pile on.

Using separate components in a rack setup



Zone ²⁰ Preamps _{Under \$1,000}

can be extremely versatile. As your needs grow, so can your rig. By combining a preamp, effects, and a power amp, you can tailor your setup for the situation—bring along everything for large rooms, scale down to a smaller system for casuals, or take just the preamp for direct recording in the studio.

What's in there? Basically, a preamp amplifies the low-level output of your bass to the higher line level required by the inputs of power amps

and mixing boards. This can be done via an all-tube circuit (with one or more 12AX7 preamp tubes), a solid-state FET (field-effect transistor) circuit, or a combination of both. These circuits pass the souped-up signal through various types of EQ: passive (no boost, cut only) or active (boost and cut) rotary types; graphic (with fixed EQ points adjustable through sliders); or full, semi-, or quasi-parametric (sweepable EQ points with adjustable

levels). Most preamp EQs control the 50Hz–5kHz area; some extend the range down to 30Hz and/or up to 15kHz. Some preamps include such bells and whistles as effects loops (these place your effects into the circuit somewhere after the input, for a cleaner sound), crossovers (which split the sound into two independent sections—high and low—allowing better control over each frequency band), DIs (which balance the signal via an XLR jack), compressors (which smooth the dynamics for a more consistent level), onboard effects, and MIDI. There are a lot of options available.

You should look hard at your current needs when considering a preamp—but think about the future, too. Don't be afraid to spend a little more money for features that fit your situation, but don't go crazy. If you don't need any effects or extended EQs, don't buy them. You can always add separate units later.

How did we do it? The BP Soundlab was our testing grounds. We assembled a righteous reference rig consisting of a Hafler Pro-5000 stereo power amp (350 watts per channel into 8Ω) driving two 4x10 cabinets, a Hartke 4.5 XL and an Eden D-410XLT. We connected the system with a pair of Pro-Co Power-Plus 14-gauge 3' speaker cables for punch. With each unit, we switched back and forth between the two 4x10s to get a feel for the sound with different cabinet coloration.

Our array of test basses spanned from vintage collectibles with passive pickups to modern instruments fitted with active pickups and state-of-the-art electronics. They included: '72 and '73 P-Basses, '65 and '72 Jazz Basses, a '76 Music Man StingRay, a '79 Music Man Sabre, a G&L L5500 5-string, a Zon Legacy Elite 5-string, a Zon 12-string, and a Peavey B-Quad 4 fretless. We gave each active bass a fresh Energizer battery at the get-go and set the tone controls flat. Each axe was plugged in with a 12' Monster Bass Cable.

What do the scores mean? Our scoring system rated four areas—Construction, Electronics, Convenience, and Sound—on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The Value score



was determined by averaging the four categories and then rounding up or down based on overall performance for the price.

We grouped the entrants into three categories: Solid State, Tube, and Hybrid, arranging them according to list price within each category. With the exception of Carvin (which sells factory direct), the retail prices shown will probably be discounted when the units are purchased through a music store or mail-order catalog.

The first round of tests was performed by the **BASS PLAYER** staff. We checked each unit's flat tone for fullness, judged the tone-contouring switches and EQs for range and added noise, and evaluated the signal processing circuitry for effectiveness, noting ease of use (or lack thereof). Then, for more perspective, we invited a few experienced players to come in and get down; some of their comments were worked into the individual reviews.

We hope you'll be skeptical when reading these evaluations, especially with regard to the critical—and highly subjective—area of tone. We all listen for certain qualities, and the preferences of our testers may be the polar opposite of yours.

Solid-State Preamps

Carvin Pro Bass 15		List Price: \$269				
MADE IN USA		1	2	3	4	5
Construction						
Electronics						
Convenience						
Sound						
VALUE						

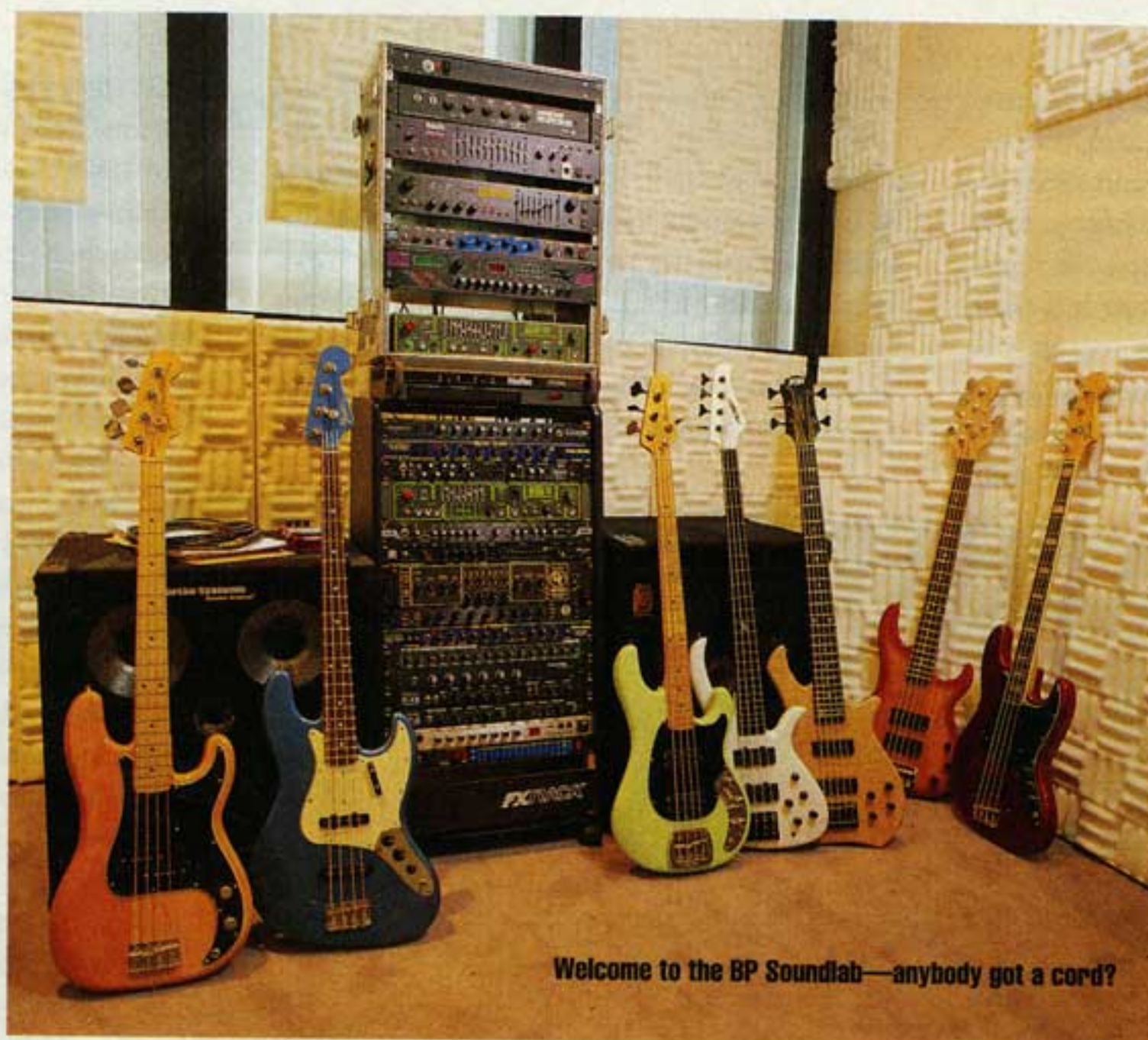
Tone Tally: Ground-pounding sound with minimal fuss.
Bottom Line: Solid construction and features.

UNLESS YOU'RE WITHIN A STONE'S THROW OF ONE OF Carvin's southern California showrooms, you won't be able to take a Pro Bass 15 for a whirl. That's because Carvin sells its wares factory direct, thus cutting out the middleman. (The price above is the actual selling price, *not* the retail list.) But you can "rack & roll" a Carvin unit for ten days and get your money back if you're not completely sold.

For just under three bills, Carvin packs some attractive features into the Pro Bass 15. This preamp is essentially the same as the one in Carvin's Pro Bass heads, minus the 5-band graphic EQ. Here's what you get: 3-band active EQ with sweep-

able midrange (80Hz–2kHz), DEEP and BRIGHT switches, compressor, noise gate, variable crossover (40Hz–1kHz), and a mono effects loop. (Too bad you can't use the loop without buying the FS36 footswitch for \$30.)

Every bass we plugged into the Pro Bass retained its character—something that often gets lost in lower-priced units. We loved the flat sound—beefy and rich with mellow highs—and



Welcome to the BP Soundlab—anybody got a cord?

we also liked the rumbling reggae vibe injected by the DEEP switch. We weren't crazy, though, about the amount of hiss added by the treble knob and BRIGHT switch—if you boost the highs, you'll probably want to use the onboard noise gate. Overall, the Carvin did not have the most warm or "organic" tone we heard, but its uncolored sound did extract the best qualities from each instrument. Comments: "That's *some* EQ!" "A good one, but a little chilly." "Robust rump."

BBE 383		List Price: \$299				
MADE IN USA		1	2	3	4	5
Construction						
Electronics						
Convenience						
Sound						
VALUE						

Tone Tally: Adds spunk to almost any axe.
Bottom Line: A good candidate for a studio rack.

Originally reviewed in September '92; also listed in 25 Amazing Bargains, July/Aug '93.

A CASE OF JEKYLL & HYDE? IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN exposed to the BBE enhancement circuit, then you already know the vast difference it can make. Such is the case with the 383 preamp—without the enhancement, we found the sound muddled,

with a cropped top end. Switch the circuit on and—*boom*—the tone opens up, revealing a pleasant, even sound with lots of spunk.

Aside from the BBE circuit's LO CONTOUR and PROCESS knobs, the 383 has a 6-band active EQ system (60Hz–3.3kHz), a PUNCH switch, and a compressor. We liked the front panel's layout and look, but we weren't crazy about the EQ's numbering system. The 0–5–10 graphic might make you think that flat is 0, but it's actually at 5. Considering the ±15dB range for each control, that's a bit misleading.

The 383 didn't like the high output of some active basses—even with the gain set at 1, the sound would occasionally grind and hit the unit's sonic ceiling. Adjusting the compressor helped somewhat, but this accented the unit's limited headroom. We were instantly wheeling and dealing with passive axes, though—once the BBE process was kicked in, EQ adjustment was rarely needed. And, with its sharp-sounding enhancement and quiet operation, we found the 383 to be a great recording preamp. Comments: "Outrageous sustain." "The PUNCH switch is good for Jack Bruce-like sounds." "Plenty of control for a normal room."

Trace Elliot GP7SM		List Price: \$399				
MADE IN ENGLAND		1	2	3	4	5
Construction						
Electronics						
Convenience						
Sound						
VALUE						

Tone Tally: From cut-mid funk to sliced-and-diced rock sounds, this unit delivers.

Bottom Line: A nice alternative to the higher-priced GP12SMX.

YOU READ IT RIGHT: HERE'S A TRACE ELLIOT THAT actually sells for less than \$400! The company must have cut corners, which would affect the classic Trace sound, right? Not as far as we can tell. The GP7SM looks and sounds 100% Trace Elliot.

The GP7 preamp is the "brains" of Trace's BLX combos and SM-series heads. It includes Trace's unique preshape filters (SHAPE 1 boosts lows and highs while cutting the mids; SHAPE 2 affects only the midrange), a 7-band graphic EQ (50Hz–5kHz) with EQ-balance knob, a tuner-output jack with MUTE switch, and both front- and rear-mounted mono effects loops. And those neon-green graphics are hard to miss. (What, no blacklight? Just kidding.) The construction of the GP7 is superb—in fact, we spied some of the same components that are lurking inside the GP12



Carvin Pro Bass 15



BBE 383



Trace Elliot GP7 SM



T.C. Electronic 1140



Tech 21 SansAmp PSA-1



Warwick WP4-7

SMX. And the manual is excellent.

We couldn't get it on with the GP7's bland non-EQed tone. Kick in SHAPE 1 and a smiley EQ curve, though, and you've got a snot-nosed monster on your hands. Opinion was split about SHAPE 2: some of us liked it for '70s-style finger-funk lines, while others just couldn't dig the heavy concentration of mids. Comments: "Nice zing." "You should solder the SHAPE 1 switch in the on position." "The GP7 lets you get a sound faster than the GP12 does."

T.C. Electronic 1140 List Price: \$716

MADE IN DENMARK	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: A bewildering array of colors.
Bottom Line: A tone-tweaker's delight.

T.C. ELECTRONIC HAS GARNERED A WELL-DESERVED reputation for building high-quality effects. Its Chorus/Flanger pedal is heavenly (see Product

Profile, April '94), and the 1140 Parametric Equalizer/Preamplifier is another Danish delight. It boasts some scary specs, like a 116dB dynamic range and 10Hz-100kHz frequency response, and one listener likened its sound to that of a "high-quality studio board." But beware—this potent little guy has some *extreme* tone-shaping capabilities, and if you're not careful you can get lost in the Tone Zone.

The 1140 can function as a basic preamp with up to 20dB of gain or as an add-on EQ system with another preamp. The 4-band parametric section spans from a subsonic 20Hz to a dog-calling 20kHz; each band (set with the CENTER knob) has 20dB of cut or boost (controlled by the FUNCTION knob) and a variable bandwidth or "Q" that spans from 1/10 of an octave (for notch filtering) to two full octaves (for shelving EQ). Talk about power.

Although the 1140 produces an "accurate" flat sound, it takes some tweaking to get the mojo movin'. We dug the unit's warm, tube-like sound, and after some experimenting were rewarded with tones we described as "SVT low end" and "the ultimate slap sound." Acoustic or electric, the 1140 can find your tone—just be ready to twid-

dle some knobs. Comments: "A serious tool." "A million tones lurking under the hood." "More command than the average bassist needs."

Tech 21 SansAmp PSA-1 List Price: \$795

MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: Processed clean sounds, epidermis-melting distortion.

Bottom Line: The undisputed champ of "crunge."

CALLIGIDO

TECH 21 MADE ITS MARK WITH THE SANSAMP Classic—an analog "tube-amplifier emulation" pedal that's popular with both guitarists and bassists for its rootsy, tube-like grind. The company's latest offering is this programmable guitar/bass preamp, which packs 99 times the power and punch of the original pedal.

The PSA-1 has 49 presets arranged in five sound groups: Marshall, Fender, MESA/Boogie, Bass, and Miscellaneous. There are also 50 user programs. Every knob on the front panel can be programmed into memory, and saving is simple: after you've tweaked to taste, hit the recessed SAVE button once, scroll to the desired memory location, and hit SAVE again.

While we were about as divided as you can get regarding the clean sounds—some liked the compressed feel and "low-note air," while others felt it was too "squashed" (Tech 21 says this can be minimized by reducing the input-gain level)—we all thought we'd been blindsided by an 18-wheeler when the distortion kicked in. Wow! The PSA-1 *really* flexed its muscles with the 12-string, spewing forth shattering tones that caused one connoisseur of crunch to immediately name it to his Top Five list. Is \$795 too much for a studio-ready bone crusher? It all depends on your needs. Comments: "Fun to play." "Bowel-bruising distorted girth." "Instant switching from one rude tone to the next."

Warwick WP4-7 List Price: \$799

MADE IN GERMANY	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: Spans the spectrum of wallop.

Bottom Line: A different take on the "British" tone.

THE WP4-7 PREAMP IS LOADED WITH VALUABLE features. We loved the onboard chromatic tuner with STANDBY switch (major points), stereo effects loop with low-cut switch (great for adding chorus that won't thin the bottom end), and stereo DI outputs. This Wamp also has a 4-band rotary EQ with adjustable mids (172Hz-2.6kHz), TURBO BASS and TREBLE boosts, and a 7-band graphic EQ

PREAMP SHOOTOUT *continued*

(50Hz–10kHz). Both EQs are footswitchable.

You need at least three rackspaces to install a WP4-7—Warwick drills the rack-screw holes ½" from the top and bottom of the rack ears, forcing you to leave space above and below for ventilation. Also, go easy on the star-head screws that hold the unit's top panel in place; if you overtighten them, the heads might break off. (Although there's nothing inside you need to service yourself).

The flat tone of the Warwick has a trace of "British" flavor with a slightly sweeter top end. We got good results with most basses by tweaking the rotary EQs to taste. The tone changed radically when we engaged the TURBO switches and boosted the graphic-EQ sliders; our '65 Jazz turned rabid with gobs of finger "swack" and pugnacious punch. The 5kHz and 10kHz sliders need to be used sparingly, though, as things can get a tad hissy when they're boosted too far. Comments: "Refined solid-state tone." "Good processing." "Wamp! There it is!"

EBS-1 Version 2

List Price: \$995

MADE IN SWEDEN	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: Can turn a passive axe into an active menace.
Bottom Line: A unique sonic signature for the taking.

CALLING THE EBS-1 "UNIQUE" IS A BIT OF AN UNDERSTATEMENT—even the input jack is different. And, with its built-in phantom power, you can juice up any 9-volt active bass without an onboard battery. This Swedish meatball produced some of the most tantalizing tones on the block, thanks to its left-field EQ system, but it also left our "plug-in-and-pluck" testers numb from option anxiety.

The heart of the EBS-1 is its 3-band low (40Hz–200Hz), middle (80Hz–2kHz with LO/MID/HIGH Q switch), and high (2kHz–8kHz) quasi-parametric EQ system with BRIGHT filter. Basically, it can be operated in three EQ modes via a front-panel switch: BYPASS sends the

unprocessed signal straight to the output jack, while ACTIVE engages the filters. In active mode, the quasi-parametric EQ gives only a boost—start with the level knobs all the way to the left and there's no sound. With this system, you can dial up mountain-shaking low-end, add half-cocked wah-wah mids, and then sprinkle in searing highs. The third mode, MIX, blends the flat sound with the active.

The EBS-1 also has a compressor, stereo effects loop, and crossover. You can tweak the phantom power, effects-gain level, crossover-frequency slopes, and balanced-out levels via rear-mounted DIP switches. While this preamp isn't for the average Joe, the comments heard in the Soundlab say it all: "Super-powerful EQ—like mixing paint." "Is this thing tube?" "The Euro sound—crisp highs, but not much soul." "Emphasizes mids in a different way."

Tech/Bass Line Pepman

List Price: \$995

MADE IN GERMANY	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

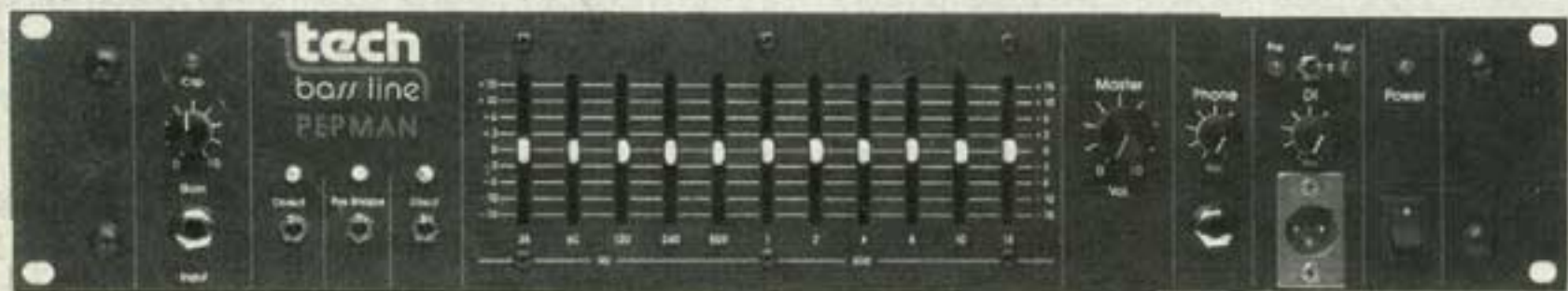
Tone Tally: Clarity is the Pepman's forte.
Bottom Line: Graphic EQ cuts like a scalpel.

AFTER HEARING THIS PREAMP'S ULTRA-PRECISE 11-BAND graphic EQ, it's easy to understand how it got its name. This super-transparent EQ section is unbelievably quiet in the 4kHz–15kHz range—even when cranked by 15dB!

The Pepman isn't packed with a lot of features, but it uses what it has to its fullest potential. We spotted an input knob with LED, a DIRECT switch, a PRESHAPE switch, an EFFECT switch for the unit's full-band and highpass mono effects loops, the aforementioned 11-band graphic (35Hz–15kHz), master-volume control, and a headphone jack with a built-in 6-watt amp that can drive a small speaker. We were disappointed, though, by the large, protruding bolt at the bottom of the box that holds the unit's toroidal transformer in place; it prevents anything from being mounted underneath. Recessing the bolt would solve the problem. (According to Tech/Bass Line, future versions



EBS-1 Version 2



Tech/Bass Line Pepman

will have a flush-mounted bolt.)

The word "attack" kept coming up during our testing of the Pepman. It sounded sweet through the Eden cabinet, but we preferred it through the Hartke, which made it a bit smoother in the highs. Although the Pepman's snappy slab of sound and brilliant transients are just what the doctor ordered for crisp '90s-style funk and chimey 12-string picking, its hyped-up high end may not appeal to everyone. When carefully tweaked, though, it can dish out a hefty, ballsy, all-out sound.

Tube Preamps

Tube Works Blue Tube		List Price: \$325				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Electronics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Convenience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sound	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
VALUE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Tone Tally: Glowing grit that can turn a fingertip into a pick.
Bottom Line: Specialty item geared towards wailing.

THE BLUE TUBE IS A GUITAR/BASS UNIT THAT CAN BE used as a standalone preamp or an add-on distortion effect into the front of an amp. And it sure is *blue*. It also made us blue in the face with frustration, when we were sent to the back of the rack to plug in our bass—there's no front-panel input jack. The Blue Tube uses a single Chinese 12AX7 preamp tube controlled by CONTOUR (adds low end into the tube), BIAS (controls the amount of cathode voltage), DRIVE, MASTER VOLUME, HIGH, MID, and LOW knobs; there are also BOOST and BYPASS switches. Hitting BYPASS doesn't mute the sound, though—it removes the active circuitry from the signal when using the Tube as an add-on effect.

The Blue Tube's flat tone was noticeably brighter than any solid-state device we tested. Some swooned over its gritty tone (one tester cited its Bassman-like feel), while others found it difficult to get a fat clean sound. Comments: "Good as an effect—not as an all-purpose preamp." "A real 'sink yer teeth into it' solo tone."

Tube Works Blue Tube II		List Price: \$500				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Electronics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Convenience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sound	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
VALUE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Tone Tally: A rack of attack.
Bottom Line: Turbo-charged Blue Tube tone.

YOU GUESSED IT—THE BLUE TUBE II IS A TWIN-channel version of the Blue Tube, with an extra side for molten gain. Unfortunately, our prob-



Tube Works Blue Tube



Tube Works Blue Tube II



Ampeg SVP-Pro



GT Electronics STP-B

lems started the minute we plugged it in. Channel B's 12AX7 tube was dead, and we had a hard time removing it from the socket because it had been anchored with a gob of silicone. We finally succeeded in uprooting the sucker; after popping in a new tube, we were off to the races. (This could happen to any tube preamp, as tubes are finicky little buggers easily damaged by shipment.)

We applauded the front-panel input jack. We were also happy to see there was no BYPASS switch; instead, we found CHANNEL and STACK (1+2) switches. We also saw more controls, with Channel A's GAIN, CONTOUR, MASTER, HIGH, MID, and LOW knobs plus Channel B's VOLUME, STACK MASTER (which controls the overall volume when both channels are selected), HIGH, MID, and LOW knobs. We liked the expanded rear-panel options, with the stereo effects loop (with send- and receive-level knobs) and various channel A and B line/instrument-level output jacks.

Some of us liked the Tube II for its "punchy, tight rock & roll attack," while others found it too limited. It definitely has an "over-the-top" type of overdrive—as one listener commented: "It has some balls—possibly two."

Ampeg SVP-Pro		List Price: \$500				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Electronics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Convenience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sound	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
VALUE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Tone Tally: Big, bad, bludgeoning tube tone with glass fangs.
Bottom Line: The heart of the King in one rackspace.

THE SVP-PRO TAKES THE FRONT END OF THE SVT-Pro head and packs it into a well-constructed rack unit. The Pro has all the familiar SVT con-

trols: ULTRA LO, ULTRA BRIGHT, and ULTRA HI switches, as well as an active 3-band EQ with a 5-position midrange selector. It also has an additional DRIVE control and a 9-band (40Hz–10kHz) graphic EQ.

The SVP comes packed with more preamp tubes (four Russian 12AX7s and one Chinese 12AU7) than any other unit we tried—and this adds up to a mountain of musical sound. The only tradeoff is a little additional turn-on hum. It also oozes coolness with its black front-panel layout and classic Ampeg logo.

Everyone who tried the SVP was knocked out, regardless of playing style. Juicy jazz, rootsy reggae, ripping rock, 12-string metal—you name it, the SVP aimed to please. And, coupled to 700 watts of MOSFET power driving eight 10s, it almost made us forget about those glowing power tubes in the original SVT. (I sure hope that's not asbestos falling from the ceiling!) In fact, a few tone-blown listeners thought the preamp's brass-knuckled punch and earth-shaking lows were tighter than those produced by an SVT head. Comments: "The girth of a 100-ton locomotive rolling down the track." "Ultra fat, dynamic EQ." "The rock sound."

GT Electronics STP-B		List Price: \$550				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Electronics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Convenience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sound	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
VALUE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Tone Tally: Clean, room-filling sound.
Bottom Line: "Studio Series" is a suitable name.

DOES THE STP-B LOOK FAMILIAR? GUESS WHAT—it's made by SWR, GT's neighbor in Sylmar, California, and it's actually the same preamp found

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PREAMP SHOOTOUT *continued*

in SWR's Studio 220 and SM-400 heads.

The STP-B is worthy of the Studio Series designation; its super-quiet, flexible performance is perfectly suited to studio work. The front panel is lined with such handy features as a limiter, AURAL ENHANCER (which affects the fundamentals for a more "live" sound), bass and treble shelving controls, a 4-band semi-parametric EQ (31Hz-1.5kHz), and a variable crossover. The construction is tops: high-quality components like Switchcraft jacks and Wima caps surround a single Groove Tubes 12AX7 tube, and an aluminum chassis cuts down on weight. We also like the large front-mounted handles.

The STP-B has a focussed midrange voice that enhances fingerstyle playing. It might be a bit too "safe sounding" for some, but its warm, spacious sound is great for filling a room with mix-cutting mids. Comments: "Balanced across-the-board sound." "A good one, but a bit stiff." "Nothing wild—just clean, uncolored sound."

Demeter VTBP-201

List Price: \$595 (\$749 as tested)

MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: Earthy, unfiltered tone to die for.

Bottom Line: A pro box capable of overcoming any aural obstacle.

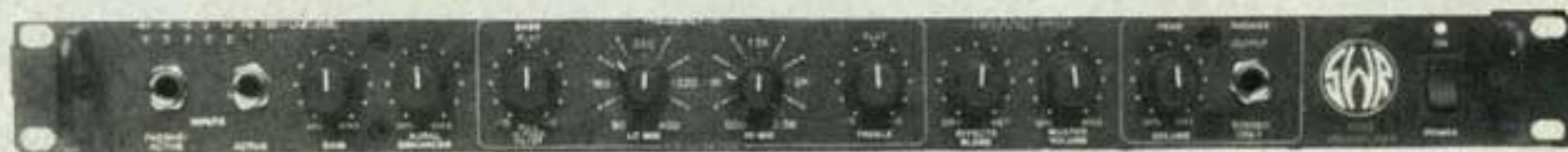
Originally reviewed in March '93.

TALK ABOUT A TONE MACHINE—THIS STRIPPED-TO-THE-CORE Sultan of Sound went over big with our tone-o-philas. Demeter's VTDB-2 direct box is a studio standard, and the VTBP-201 offers the same kind of performance. It doesn't have a ton of bells and whistles: just a volume knob and 4-band rotary EQ plus BRIGHT, BASS EQ (60Hz/120Hz), and PRESENCE EQ (3kHz/6kHz) switches.

Internally, the Demeter is a masterpiece—Switchcraft jacks, Mouser pots, Wima caps, metal-film resistors, two ceramic tube sockets, beefy switches, an optional Jensen DI transformer (which



Demeter VTBP-201



SWR Grand Prix

upped the price of our test unit to \$749), and a board lined with thick solder traces. It would have received a perfect construction score had it not been for a stripped-out midrange knob that fell off; also, the unit's left rack ear was actually a right ear installed upside down, making our test unit unrackable. We also weren't sold on the effects loop—it distorted the input of a chorus pedal, and the low end dropped off. The 201's loop is most likely optimized for rack equipment; installing a -10dBV/+4dBu level switch would help.

We couldn't find a bass that sounded bad through this baby. "This is *the shit*," exclaimed one tester. Although the EQ is on the subtle side, the 201's ultra-fast transient response kept our eyes glued to our power amp's PEAK LEDs. Tubeaholics will love the dynamic, mush-free bottom and the lush, sparkling, detailed highs. Comments: "As pure as it gets." "Slapper heaven." "Controlled tube sound—not too cluttered or muddy."

SWR Grand Prix

List Price: \$649

MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: Tight, balanced, record-ready sound.

Bottom Line: A class act.

THAT "SWR SOUND"—TIGHT AND CRISP, WITH A smooth, hi-fi response—is exactly what you get from the Grand Prix. And when it comes to interior layout, this preamp is the *crème de la crème*. The single Groove Tubes 12AX7 is mounted on a thick brass plate (which doesn't flex when you remove the tube) and kept at a safe distance from the board. This is smart—tube-heat dissipation can lead to problems. The aluminum chassis is filled with Switchcraft jacks, custom-made Noble pots, Wima caps, and a copper-traced circuit board. A black brushed-aluminum front-panel and a pair of mini-handles complete the package.

The Grand Prix has the usual SWR features AURAL ENHANCER, BASS and TREBLE shelving controls, LOW (80Hz-400Hz) and HIGH-MIDRANGE (500Hz-2.5kHz) controls with sweepable centers, effects loop with BLEND knob, master volume, and a stereo headphone jack with level control. It also

fuse to blow. Exhibit restraint with those highs—you don't need to go higher than about 6 with the control's sensitivity, trust me. (For further tone-crafting capabilities, check out Alembic's SF-2 Superfilter, a two-channel unit that can provide tons of thunder as well as glass-shattering highs; look for a Product Profile of the SF-2 in a future issue.)

We found that hard-sounding instruments (vintage and modern) benefited the most from the F-1X's buttery bottom end, and we were knocked out by the difference this warmth made with graphite and maple-neck axes. ("This is as tube as tube gets," said one listener.) We also thought the F-1X's crossover was the best-sounding of the bunch, capable of producing reggae-thick bottom while retaining upper-end growl. Comments: "It adds warmth but doesn't rob clarity." "Lots of ringing realness." "The DEEP switch cleans up a muddy B string."

Harry Kolbe BP-1		List Price: \$800				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	█	█	█	█	█	
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█	
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█	
Sound	█	█	█	█	█	
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█	

Tone Tally: Thick and rich with a solid-midrange job.
Bottom Line: A workhorse.

NEW YORK CITY-BASED HARRY KOLBE IS WELL known for his hip tube-amp mods and tech service—just ask clients like Kim Stone, Carmine Rojas, Fernando Saunders, or Bernard Edwards. Not surprisingly, Harry's BP-1 is a testament to his vast knowledge of what makes a tube tick.

The BP-1 won't win any prizes for aesthetics; the solid-black-front panel with six knobs and an input jack is as stark as it gets. The mid controls are a bit different—their passive inductor/capacitor design provides ±12dB of peak and dip EQ, a design that prevents the sound from becoming

"hollow" with more extreme EQ settings. Two tiny push buttons, HI and LO, switch the low- and high-midrange EQ points from 220Hz to 440Hz and 800Hz to 1.6kHz respectively.

The BP-1 was the quietest all-tube preamp we tested; even with the treble control dimed, we heard virtually no hiss or hum of any kind. We found it good for bread-and-butter tones with a fair amount of punch and bite. It also delivered the most focussed B-string sound we heard—the low-mid knob is excellent for cleaning up a blurry 5-string. We'd like to see a BRIGHT switch to expand the unit's high-frequency range, and we'd also like to see the construction beefed up a bit. Comments: "Solid, chunky tone—not a lot of coloring." "A little flabby—could be tighter." "Extraordinary. You can crank the mids and move a ton of air."

Hybrid Preamps

Peavey Max		List Price: \$399				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	█	█	█	█	█	
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█	
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█	
Sound	█	█	█	█	█	
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█	

Tone Tally: Midrange voice lacks low-end finesse.
Bottom Line: A for effort, C for tone.

THE PEAVEY MAX IS ONE OF THE LOWEST-PRICED units to combine both tube and solid-state preamps into one rackspace. Unfortunately, this versatility turned out to be a doubled-edged sword for this feature-laden unit.

The Max needs a sturdier box. We were a bit dismayed to find a bent left rack ear right out of the shipping carton, and we frowned when we were forced to remove 14 screws to get under the unit's flimsy top plate. (And you *will* have to replace the single 12AX7 tube at some point.)

The Max treats its separate preamps with two different EQ types: passive 3-band rotary EQ with PUNCH and BRIGHT switches for the tube side, and a 7-band graphic (40Hz–10kHz) with rotary BASS and TREBLE shelving controls for the solid-state side. You can use either preamp independently or combine the two sides, varying the mix via a BLEND knob.

How's it sound? We found the tone of the combined preamps to be the best, but we weren't that excited with the end results. The Max's somewhat cardboardy bottom and compressed feel didn't wow us. We would prefer to see the Max produce one great tone rather than several okay ones. "It does a lot for the dough, but there are *too many* tone factors," said one listener. (For the record, the Max did sound a lot better when bi-amped. This gave us better control over the preamp's mid-heavy voice.) The unit seems best suited to a raucous rock setting, where its punchy tone could cut through even the thickest sauce.

Continued on page 60

comes with one of the best manuals around.

As with most distinctive sounds, you're bound to be on one side or other of the tone fence regarding the Grand Prix. It offers a basic sound with lots of flexibility, but some of us felt it was better suited to studio use than rock & roll bashing. For further versatility, we'd like to see a sweepable treble-frequency knob like the one on the Baby Blue. Comments: "The L.A. tone—that's the SWR sound." "It's tighter than the Ampeg." "Accurate—a louder version of what this bass sounds like."

Alembic F-1X		List Price: \$695				
MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5	
Construction	█	█	█	█	█	
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█	
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█	
Sound	█	█	█	█	█	
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█	

Tone Tally: Gobs of pure-tube warmth.
Bottom Line: An excellent choice for any rack.

DIG THAT: A PERFECT SCORE. ALEMBIC KNOWS BASS tone, that's for sure—and they should, because they've been building both basses and preamps for more than 25 years. Alembic introduced the F2B stereo tube preamp in 1969, and it soon became popular with such cats as Jack Casady, Phil Lesh, and Stanley Clarke. The F-1X is essentially an updated single-channel version of the F2B, with the addition of a DEEP switch, DI, and two-way crossover.

As with the Demeter, simplicity is the F-1X's ticket to tone. A single volume, 3-band EQ with passive BASS, MIDRANGE, and TREBLE knobs, and both BRIGHT and DEEP switches are all that's required for a trip to nirvana. Although the EQ is passive, it does have impressive range—in fact, when we cranked the treble control with the BRIGHT switch on, the preamp fed back wildly, causing the Eden's tweeter-protection



Alembic F-1X



Harry Kolbe BP-1



Peavey Max

ADA MB-1 List Price: \$799

MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: A rainbow of colors at the touch of a MIDI switch.
Bottom Line: Good choice for a Top 40 gig.

Originally reviewed in July/Aug '91

IF YOU'RE INTO BELLS AND WHISTLES, WITH THE MB-1 you can "ring and blow for days" (as one listener put it). ADA supercharges this programmable box with parallel tube and solid-state preamps, 256 user programs, a 5-band semi-parametric EQ, analog chorus, contour filters, two parallel effects loops with send and return levels, crossover, low-frequency limiter, compressor, and MIDI. The Version 2.0 software also includes 79 new presets, including ones created by Victor Wooten, Steve Bailey, Chuck Rainey, and D.D. Verni. Presets 30 through 79 emulate various notable amps, including the Ampeg SVT, Peavey Megabass, G-K 800RB, SWR SM-400, and Trace Elliot AH500X.

Although we saw a cavalcade of chips on the MB-1's circuit board, it boasts an all-analog signal path. The unit's two 12AX7 tubes and solid-state section are digital-free, thus faithfully preserving your tone. To our ears, the majority of the MB-1's sounds are on the compressed side. We found it easy to overload the presets' EQ section with the amount of low end preprogrammed into them. Our favorite patch was Victor Wooten's SINISTER MINISTER; this tight and lively sound was a good building point for the rest of our tone tablets. Comments: "It's all there, but it doesn't instantly give it up." "Good for run-of-the-mill tones." "Quiet, clean sound."



ADA MB-1



A.R.T. SGX Nightbass Studio Edition

A.R.T. SGX Nightbass Studio Edition List Price: \$849

MADE IN USA	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: Ready-to-record prepackaged sounds.
Bottom Line: The kitchen-sink model of bass processors.

Originally reviewed in May/June '92.

IF THE THOUGHT OF LOADING BANKS OF PRESETS, tweaking reverb algorithms, or adjusting MIDI channels makes you shudder, perhaps you should move on. Depending on your technical inclinations, the Nightbass Studio Edition could be a godsend—or your worst nightmare.

Boy, what *doesn't* the Nightbass do? With over 70 effects, four banks of 400 presets, and both tube and solid-state preamp types, it's safe to say you could process just about anything with this thing. The Nightbass's presets run from dry preamps to basic tones awash in reverb, to sounds drenched with delays, to tones that don't even resemble a bass. To build even a basic bank of sounds, you have to manipulate loads of parameters—so be prepared to spend some time pushing buttons. (The Nightbass is supplied with an extensive manual and quick-tutorial card to speed up use, though.)

The overall quality of the Nightbass effects is quite good (we'd rate them a 4 on a scale of 5). The warm modulation sections are great for everything from subtle chorusing to all-out flange-mania. The preamps, however, leave a bit to be desired; the sound is contained and compressed-sounding (even with the compression section off), and it's also a bit lifeless for performance use. But the name does say "Studio Edition," right? The Nightbass isn't the best choice for a live situation, but it's good for a bassist/guitarist/engineer who likes to "diddle for days" in a studio setting.

Trace Elliot GP12SMX List Price: \$995

MADE IN ENGLAND	1	2	3	4	5
Construction	█	█	█	█	█
Electronics	█	█	█	█	█
Convenience	█	█	█	█	█
Sound	█	█	█	█	█
VALUE	█	█	█	█	█

Tone Tally: EQed wall-of-sound.
Bottom Line: A mainstay in the world of bass tones.

THE TRACE ELLIOT SOUND, WITH ITS TAUT, PUNCHY bottom and razor-sharp highs, is one of the standards of the industry, and the GP12SMX is the Rolls Royce of the Trace preamp line. It's available as both a standalone unit and in the SMX series of heads.

Try as we might, we could only get a peek at the GP12's interior—four of the unit's 14 screws stripped out when we tried (carefully) to unscrew them, making the removal of the top panel impossible. (Trace is looking into the problem.) It's also a drag to have to remove the rack ears to get under the top plate; this wasn't a problem for us, though, since our unit was shipped without rack ears. The GP12 has classic Trace features—such as PRESHAPE filters and an extended 12-band (30Hz–15kHz) graphic EQ with EQ-balance knob—but it also adds some new twists: there are both solid-state and "valve" (the British term for tube) preamps with an INPUT-BLEND knob, separate low- and high-compression sections, two effects loops (one serial, mono full-range and one parallel, stereo high-pass), a crossover with stereo highpass outputs, and stereo post-EQ DIs. And yes, it lights up green.

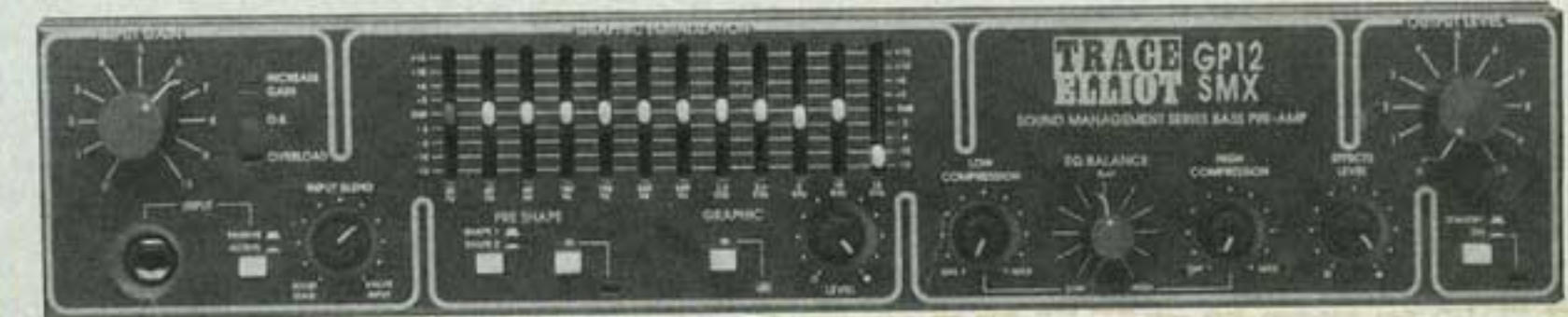
Although it took some tinkering with the 12-band EQ and filters, we coaxed some ballsy tones from this green giant. (Rock tones with a pick were especially dangerous.) We also thought the GP12's flat tone was better than the GP7's, although (once again) we liked it a lot more with the PRESHAPE in play. Comments: "Could blossom a bit better." "30Hz slider is good for low B and reggae tones." "Has its own voice."

The Last Word

While the numbers speak for themselves, it should be noted that each preamp measured up to (or exceeded) the manufacturer's intended use. And we learned one thing for sure: all the bells and whistles in the world won't make up for an average sound. In the end, our favorites were the units with minimal features that served up maximum tone.

Just remember this: Use our comments as a springboard for your own evaluations as you suit up for your own tone-tasting mission. Hopefully, once you decide to take the preamp plunge, you'll be able to find your niche in the Tone Zone without getting *too* soaked. Tweak on!

Thanks to Eden, Hartke, and Hasler for providing our rock-solid reference rig. Thanks also to Craig McFarland (Ronnie Montrose, M.L.R.V.) and Ernie Rideout (Brother Buzz) for donating crucial comments and lip-smacking licks.



Trace Elliot GP12SMX