

Review: Crimsontone SE Mini Amp

Source: Premier Guitar Magazine / September 2011



The single-ended all-tube head is powered by a Sovtek EL84 coupled to a JJ ECC803 preamp tube and a **Mercury Magnetics** GA5-P power transformer for a maximum of four watts.

by Jordan Wagner

Decades ago, practice amps were effectively no-frills versions of their bigger brothers. Even so, those little amps of yesteryear became something magical in the studio. From Jimmy Page and his Supro to Joe Walsh and his Fender Champ, getting big sounds from little amps became the

stuff of legend and a go-to approach for recording. Crimsontone Amplifiers embraces this philosophy in a big way—only two of the seven amps the company offers are 20 watts or more. Their newest amp—the 4-watt SE Mini—is a testament to the power of small and a cool nod to the role of

low-wattage amps in the history of rock 'n' roll.

In the Court of the Crimson

At just 7.5 pounds, the SE Mini certainly lives up to its name. The cabinet is covered in a tough red tweed fabric, and it features a sporty aluminum handle for easy transporting to the studio—or a gig in the park for that matter. Crimsontone didn't design the SE Mini with gimmicks in mind either, which is evident in the simple feature set. It has just four controls—Gain, Tone, and Master knobs, along with a tiny Gain Boost switch.

The single-ended, all-tube head is powered by a Sovtek EL84 coupled to a JJ ECC803 preamp tube and a **Mercury Magnetics** GA5-P power transformer for a maximum of four watts. The GA5-P is part of **Mercury Magnetics'** fantastic **Toneclone Plus** line, which is stocked with the company's replicas of famous power transformers from the past. In this case, it's a faithful reproduction of the transformer in Gibson's 1950s Les Paul Jr. combos. I was pleased to see that the output transformer was also a **Mercury Magnetics** model, an FTCO-M that replicates the units in Fender's Tweed Champ amplifiers of yore.

The SE Mini doesn't rely on modern circuit design, but instead forgoes current technologies for a traditional, handwired, point-to-point circuit. Upon pulling out the adorably small chassis, I was treated to the sight of tidy wiring held together with clean solder joints and tight mounting. And the



Continued on next page....



Components—F&T filter caps, Alpha pots, Orange Drop capacitors, carbon-comp resistors, two Xicon power resistors, and a Cliff input jack—are all top-of-the-line.

Good Things... Small Packages

Crimsonstone touts the SE Mini as a practice amplifier, but it excels at hitting tones in the '60s classic-rock vein. With a Fender 60th Anniversary Telecaster and a feed to the two 12" speakers in a Fender Twin Reverb reissue, the Crimsontone's clean mode belted out seriously raw, garage-rhythm jangle with a dash of classic Neil Young sting thrown in. The highs are crisp and brash, with tight lows and a gritty midrange. With a Gibson Les Paul Studio, the amp accentuated the midrange and softened highs, but the amp still retained its bold essence, staying tight in the low end and having a nice, even sag. It's not a sound for everybody, but it speaks in the raw, unadulterated tones of no-holds-barred slingers of the first classic heavy rock era.

It's worth noting that, while the SE Mini kicks with James Gang-worthy tones, I did have to really work with my picking hand to squeeze any real dynamics out of it. That said, that's not uncommon with most small-wattage amps, and it certainly doesn't mean that the amp isn't touch sensitive. But if you're used to using a big Marshall to get your '70s tones, the SE Mini will feel like an entirely different animal. The amp doesn't have excessive gain or saturation to hide behind, so it assures that you hear every single mistake. The sweet sounds that come as a trade-off are well worth it, though.

This Dog Bites

Getting the most meat and bite out of the SE Mini requires careful adjustment of the Gain and Master knobs. With the Gain Boost switch off, not much grit is available from the Gain control. Rather, it acted more like a voicing control, altering the feeling and response of the tone. Most master-volume tube amps have a gain structure that changes from tighter and crisper to warmer and spongier as you increase the Gain. Without the boost on, the Gain control on the SE Mini reacts the same way, but without adding huge amounts of saturation. Kicking in the Gain Boost adds a dose of rage to the tone, and I thoroughly enjoyed playing quick double-stops and soaring country bends with the SE Mini's overdrive-infused, high-midrange snap.

Predictably, the boost kicks up the volume a few decibels, too. And I discovered by lowering my guitar's Volume knob just how well the amp cleans up at even the dirtiest settings. The Gain Boost adds noticeable touch sensitivity, too. I got one of my favorite tones by dropping the Telecaster's Volume down a quarter of the way and letting my picking-hand attack determine the amount of overdrive.

If you're looking for more aggressive tones, it also pays to keep the Master at or near its highest levels. At practice-amp volume levels, the Telecaster sounded a little thin, and understandably so—I wasn't pushing the single EL84 enough until I moved the Master to 3 o'clock, where there was a considerable volume jump. The sweet spot on the SE Mini's Master is just a little higher, where it retains just the right amount of definition, while maintaining ample punch. Set the Master there and use the Gain control to set the flavor of the attack, and you'll find a load of tone variation at your fingertips. Working within this range helped me keep the Tele's bite under control and let the raw nature of the amp's voicing shine through.

The Verdict

Four watts may not be the right recipe for tearing the paint off walls, but the SE Mini uses a well-designed circuit and quality components to sound much bigger than it looks—especially with a few 12" speakers at the receiving end of its signal. Crimsontone's SE Mini is a great choice for lovers of dirty, jangly rock guitar tones. But, like tube practice amps of yesteryear that needed to be driven and played hard to achieve their fullest tonal potential, it can require a more dynamic and forceful touch to tap into its inherent dynamics. Still, there's nothing quite like a healthy, low-watt tube amp cranked to high heaven for creating sweet, raw, rowdy sounds. In that musical category, the SE Mini is a hit.

Buy if...

you're a fan of dirty, to-the-point guitar tones at reasonable volumes.

Skip if...

you need to be heard over a drummer or can't abide bone-simple feature sets.

Rating...



Street \$799

Crimsonstone Amplifiers

Crimsonstone.com

Crimsonstone SE Mini—Clean—Fender 60th Anniversary Tele by Premier Guitar 10 plays 0.30

Crimsonstone SE Mini—Clean—Fender 60th Anniversary Tele by Premier Guitar 9 plays 0.46



9167 Independence Ave. • Chatsworth, CA 91311

MercuryMagnetics.com

(818) 998-7791