



Simple Volume and Tone control scheme

Low- and High-gain inputs

# SATELLITE MUDSHARK

BY JORDAN WAGNER

Few social groups are as resistant to the march of technology than guitarists. Even while amplifier design has witnessed drastic leaps in development and we now have incredibly versatile digital-modeling units brimming with processing power, huge sections of the electric guitar-playing populace still cling to the technology that propelled records now 50 years old (or more).

The upside of all this evolutionary reticence, of course, is that great builders are refining the simple tube circuit like never before. And few builders embrace the elegant simplicity of old tube circuits quite like Adam Grimm of Satellite Amplifiers. Grimm started Satellite when he built an amp for the lap-steel player in his Hawaiian band, and he's remained restlessly fascinated with the potential of tube amps ever since. His ever-evolving line now has 10 models, and his newest amp—the 20-watt Mudshark—shows he hasn't yet surfaced from his deep-dive exploration of great tube designs.

## Like a Bolt from the Blue

The Mudshark's design specs owe a lot to the famed Supro Thunderbolt amplifier

from the mid '60s. Legend has it that Jimmy Page used a Thunderbolt combo from this era as his main studio recording amplifier for the first two Led Zeppelin albums. Just like the Thunderbolt, the Mudshark is built around two 5881 power tubes, a pair of 12AX7 preamp tubes, and a 5Y3 rectifier tube.

The Mudshark features some notable improvements on the Supro design, however. Apart from higher build quality, it's powered by Mercury Magnetics transformers, which are highly regarded in boutique circles because they provide reliable power and add tonal heft. No matter where I looked, the Mudshark's guts were put together just about perfectly, with flawless solder joints and tightly routed wiring in the point-to-point circuit. And if simplicity is a Satellite hallmark, the plug-and-play Mudshark could easily be the company's flagship—it has just two controls: Volume and Tone. Apart from those, the high- and low-gain inputs, and the 3-way ohm switch (4, 8, or 16) around back, there's nothing to fiddle with.

The Mudshark looks straight-up cool. It's covered in gorgeous blue-sparkle vinyl

that's reminiscent of Kustom's old tuck 'n' roll cabinets (although Satellite applies the vinyl directly to the wood). There were some small air bubbles and divots in the material that wouldn't be noticeable to, say, fans at a gig, but they were apparent up close and when I ran my hand over the head cabinet—a small issue, but one that kept the amp from being aesthetically perfect.

## Serious Bite

Knowing the Mudshark was designed with Jimmy Page in mind, I grabbed a Telecaster and a '77 Greco EG-700 Les Paul copy and routed the Mudshark through a Marshall JCM800 4x12. With the Volume and Tone controls both at noon, I dug into the Telecaster and was rewarded with a bark that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I expected a tone with vintage vibe, but I hadn't anticipated being bludgeoned with it. The Mudshark is an aggressive predator of an amp that bares deadly teeth with every note, remains defined during complex chord work, and exhibits pick sensitivity that I have rarely experienced in an amplifier. It's very honest, with beautiful grit and nary an ounce of dampening or over-compression.

## Going for the Kill


Primed to see how hotter humbuckers would sound, I plugged in the Greco and explored hard-rock territory. All the sonic

detail I heard with the Telecaster remained intact, albeit with more growl, sustain, and thickness. The dual coils drove the Mudshark into overdrive with the Volume at about 10 o'clock. As I moved the knob higher, the volume increased until about one o'clock. Beyond that, it just piled on more grit and sustain. When I flipped to the Greco's neck pickup position, the tone remained solid in the low end and sharp in the highs, reminiscent of the smooth tones of early Chicago. I'm certainly no Terry Kath, yet hearing what the amp was capable of at those settings made me want to rip in that style like never before.

With humbuckers, I found that setting both controls at 1 o'clock offered the most balanced tones and still allowed me to achieve cleaner tones by easing up on my attack and dropping the guitar's volume ever so slightly. With Tone set any higher than 2 o'clock, the amp became too bright and slightly brittle sounding. Past 4 o'clock, it was prone to feedback, too. One other thing worth mentioning is that, since the amp is

based on a non-master-volume circuit, an attenuator might be in order for those who would like to play at lower volumes while still taking advantage of the amp's overdrive. It's only 20 watts, but they're *loud* watts—loud enough to gig with.

#### The Verdict

If you're a lover of the aggressive, but smooth and harmonically rich, tones of classic-rock albums of the late '60s and early '70s, the Satellite Mudshark should absolutely be on your radar. It's not the most versatile amplifier ever, but not having extra bells and whistles is part of the allure of this type of design—the simplicity affords certain raw, in-your-face tones that can't be had from more sophisticated circuits. The Mudshark's back-to-the-basics topology works like a time machine back to early '60s. Whether you're looking to snatch some of Page's early Zep mojo or find your own straightforward tone, the Mudshark is an amazingly inspirational place to begin. 



#### Rating:



#### Buy If...

you're passionate about authentic and authoritative late-'60s and early-'70s rock tones.

#### Skip If...

you need more flexible features such as a Master Volume, an effects loop, and/or a 3-band EQ.

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