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SWR Redhead

BY JONATHAN HERRERA



SWR REDHEAD

List \$2,349

Street \$1,650

Pros Punchy, loud, and articulate combo with excellent connectivity and stage-to-studio versatility

Cons A bit heavy by contemporary standards; slick sound not for everyone

Bottom Line A classic gets refurbished, with stellar results.

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IT'S EASY TO FORGET NOW, WHAT WITH the recent glut of high-tech bass amps and cabinets, but when SWR released the original Redhead in 1988, it signaled a transition between eras. In a sense, much of what characterizes contemporary high-end bass combo designs—high fidelity preamps with precise signal shaping, gig-worthy power, and multi-

driver cabinets—began with the Redhead. It quickly became the hip amp to have, and while subsequent years found other manufacturers entering the increasingly competitive category and diminishing the Redhead's dominance, the Redhead is still one of a handful of seminal amp designs.

To bring the Redhead in line with the

SOUNDRoom POLICY

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TECH TALK

BY JONATHAN HERRERA

One of the key upgrades SWR touts in its revamped Redhead combo (see page 50) is its tube DI. We're more familiar with tubes in an amp context, but tube DIs are relatively rare.

A DI is a device designed to interface a bass (we'll stick to bass applications here, although DIs are used all over the band) with a mixer or mic preamp. It converts a bass's high-impedance, instrument-level signal to a balanced (for noise rejection), mic-level, low-impedance signal appropriate for a mixer. A passive DI uses a transformer to achieve this conversion, but the transformer type results in the DI having a

low input impedance—making passive DIs less than ideal for passive basses, which like to “see” a high input impedance for maximum fidelity. A powered or “active” component (either a tube or transistor) buffers the DI's input, raising its impedance and consequentially improving a passive bass's tone. The active component can also color the sound considerably, particularly when it adds gain. A tube DI is simply a DI circuit that uses a tube to buffer the input (and in some cases, add gain) while also incorporating its pleasing audio characteristics.

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demands of today's player, SWR embarked on a complete overhaul, resulting in this latest model. While the new Redhead looks superficially similar to the old model (and its follow-up, the Super Redhead), it's substantially different, with a redesigned, higher-output power amp, tube-driven DI, Eminence drivers, built-in compressor, tuning mute, steel-reinforced cover (the old cover was just wood), and small aesthetic updates, like the front-panel's deeper red hue and new SWR “shield” badge. As with the original, SWR intends the Redhead to be an all-in-one solution for any bassist seeking a versatile, high-powered combo.

For a few years we've seen a steady stream of new lightweight amp technologies, like neodymium speakers, Class D power amps, and switching power supplies. It's spoiled me, as the Redhead felt heavier than my new wussy tendencies were prepared for. What it loses in the weight battle, it makes up for with a sense of rugged solidness. The 5/8" birch-ply cabinet, which is glued, nailed, and dado-and-rabbet joined, feels substantial, and the chrome-stamped grille is vibration free and robustly locked down. Overall, the Redhead's construction and design is well thought-out, particularly the nicely placed handles and front panel, which is angled up for better viewing and recessed for protection. The included open rackspace, perfect for a tuner or effects unit,

is another thoughtful feature. Unique among similarly configured combo amps is the Redhead's steel-reinforced cover. When latched to the amp, it provides thorough protection for the speakers and front panel. Detached, it doubles as a nifty tilt-up amp stand with the casters removed. The components feel tough enough, with smooth-turning pots, good-quality jacks, and no sense of chintziness anywhere.

RARE HAIR

For the Redhead's rehab, SWR didn't mess with the original's preamp voicing, the core of which dates back to SWR founder Steve Rabe's original design. It's a justly iconized circuit, famed for its cleanliness, shimmering highs, slightly scooped mids, and taut, controlled lows. The AURAL ENHANCER is another classic SWR feature; it's a variable additive/subtractive EQ contour that shifts emphasis as you turn the knob. Low positions give a bass- and mid-frequency bump while higher settings get progressively scoopier, yielding ever more hollow, tingly tones. The EQ is well voiced and useful; push-pull pots on the BASS and TREBLE controls augment the basic circuit, changing the shelving filters' knee frequencies when engaged. There's a thorough array of mutes, including a speaker ON/OFF switch, a TUNING mute, and a mute for the DI. The two inputs offer not only sensitivity appropriate for active or passive basses, but

The Redhead's cover offers protection beyond any other similar combo, plus it doubles as a stand that can angle the combo upward.

TECH SPECS

Input impedance ACTIVE, 130k Ω ; PASSIVE, 1M Ω **Tone controls** BASS: ± 15 dB @ 70Hz(shelving), w/TURBO engaged: ± 15 dB @ 30Hz; MID RANGE: ± 15 dB @ 200Hz–800Hz (semi-parametric); TREBLE: ± 15 dB @ 2kHz (shelving), w/TRANSPARENCY engaged: ± 15 dB @ 4kHz**DI output** Tube-driven, transformer-coupled balanced XLR with MUTE, LINE/DIRECT, and PAD controls**Power amp topology** Class AB**Power output** 400 watts into internal cabinet; 600 watts with 4 Ω extension**Cabinet type** 2x10 + horn**Speaker manufacturer** Custom-designed Eminence drivers with Foster horn**Weight** 80 lbs**Made in** U.S.A. (some parts manufactured in Mexico)**Warranty** Five years

different input impedances as well, with the PASSIVE jack's 1M Ω rating perfect for realizing a passive bass's full frequency potential.

The Redhead was always a studio favorite, and the newest model enhances this quality further with the addition of a smooth-sounding compressor and transformer-coupled, onboard tube DI (see sidebar). I appreciate the Redhead's DI layout, putting the controls on the front panel but leaving the XLR jack on the rear. The DI's parameters are particularly robust, with LINE or DIRECT signal-flow options (LINE incorporates the preamp and EQ, DIRECT is tapped off the input stage), a GROUND LIFT, a DI-specific mute (a killer feature that's sadly lacking on many amps—ever try to tune at a gig when your bass is still in the house mains?), and a PAD for ensuring proper gain staging with a variety of recording and sound-reinforcement equipment.

The new Redhead is louder than its predecessor. A lot louder. On its own, it's hard to imagine a gig that it wouldn't comfortably hang with (plus, anything bigger and there'll be PA reinforcement). Its tone is distinctively SWR: rapid attack, a sense of overall dynamic control, an uncolored (and uncluttered) midrange,

and a snappy top. What it isn't: buttery, thick, syrupy, gooey—the colorful characteristics that may or may not be your thing. The new drivers are superb, holding tight under extreme B-string attacks and dispersing in a pleasantly elegant room-filling soundstage. The Redhead's sharp and authoritative attack, coupled with its crisp high end, make it a particularly killin' slap amp. The cool compressor, inherited from SWR's flagship SMI 500 (and the soon-to-arrive Marcus Miller preamp), enhances this facet of the Redhead's personality, adding evenness and presence without offensive coloration. The DI performed well in a computer-recording environment, adding a bit of burnished color lacking in the live signal, due largely to the harmonic characteristics of its tube and transformer components.

The new Redhead is more of what it's always been: a high-quality, pristine-sounding, pro-level amp for those who prefer clarity and crackle to mud and crunch. In upgrading the power, speakers, and feature set, SWR successfully took the combo into the 21st century, and so the Redhead is back in contention as a titillating bass-gear pin-up, worth the price of admission. **BP**

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