

Review

Frenzel FM – 5E3 SD “Super Deluxe” Tube Guitar Amplifier

by Ken Morgan, Midland, TX

Guitarists have long sought to find amplifiers to suit their personalities and allow them to express their musical thoughts with gear not standing in the way, or being a part of that expression. As a player with well over 35 years of stage and studio time, every amp I've played through, be it the latest and greatest, cheapest disposables, classic standby, revered names from through out guitar amp history, they all have left me wanting something else, until now.

I found the Frenzel Super Deluxe with octal preamp tubes. Now, the search is over. The Frenzel Super Deluxe is a 50/25/12 watt amp with the same circuits and components as the original Fender, but adds a couple of features. More power, additional tone controls, an an effects loop that actually works, optional reverb, multi-purposed presense control, speaker mute for silent recording, switchable speaker impedance, and as a bonus, a master volume setup that allows the amp to achieve that famous Deluxe drive at reasonable volumes.

The amp's tone controls are more interactive than one would suspect, as they are advertised to be modeled after 'classic 60s JTM45 – Bassman 5F6 style 3 band controls.' Having owned both of these amps, I can say the sounds are very close, but expand quite a bit on the basic theme with the addition of the presence control (5F6A circuit). The amp comes standard with JJ's 6L6s, but can use 5881, KT66, 6550 without rebias. Additionally, EL34s can be used with the flick of a switch on the rear of the amp – extremely cool variations are available without any real hassle, should the user choose.

The amp also features a post output transformer line out with level control that disconnects the speaker load. You can use this as a DI to a console, or as a headphone amp is you choose. A stunningly useful option.

I chose to get the octal preamp tubes, 6SL7s, as an upgrade over the standard 12AX7s. The sonic differences are not small. The combination of octal preamp tubes, power tubes, and a tube rectifier, all wired without any circuit board, turret board, or anything except direct point to point wiring makes for the purest guitar tone I've experienced. When I unpacked the box, I was surprised at the lengths Frenzel took to ensure safe shipping. Inside the shipping box was another box, isolated by Styrofoam cubes in the fashion of a shock mounted rack case, to protect the amp. Unpacking the box within the box was no easy task, either, as it was stuffed, packed, and double packed like no other shipped product I've experienced in 20 years. (I've seen multi-thousand dollar digital

consoles with hundreds of circuit boards shipped in less than half the protection the Frenzel has...hats off to Jim!). The JJ's and Sovtek tubes were packed inside the amp, not installed. Very simple, but comprehensive instructions on installation and initial powering up were, of course, included and easy to read.

Now the fun part! I hooked the amp up to a closed back 112 with an Eminence I pulled out of a Twin Reverb years ago, and plugged in my favorite Telecaster – an old custom built sunburst loaded with Duncans, featuring the Jim Glaser (Brent Mason) blend control for the middle strat pickup. I powered the amp, watched everything come to life, and after 5 minutes activated the standby switch. Setting every control straight up to the 12 o'clock position, I was greeted with a powerful and immediately usable sound – usable, but much louder than I anticipated. Rolling the mids back to the 10 o'clock position (there are no numbers on the control panel – my preference) the highs and presence up to about 2, the master up and the gain down, I found my sound. *It literally took longer to unpack the box than it did to find the sound I had been seeking for 35 years.* After playing the amp a bit, I started experimenting, to see what else was in there. Turning the amp gain wide open the the master down, I found the sound of a dimed Deluxe – not harsh, but smooth and creamy, and cleaning back up when easing up on right hand attack or when rolling the guitar volume down (!!!!) The Super Deluxe is NOT meant for metal, but is the ultimate blues machine. The amp also excels at jazz sounds, as it never (in spite of my best efforts) flabs out in the low end. Bass notes were tight, controlled, and detailed, never unpleasant. It is not brittle in its high end response, either, just clear and bright. I should mention here that this amp is the quietest amp I've encountered. There is no hiss, hum, buzz, anything. If one hears any noise while the unit is idling, it comes from something else, not the amp.

Taking things a bit further, I pushed the mids up to about 3 o'clock, with a meat and boldness always lacking in Fender designs. I would love to hear this amp through an old pre-Rola Marshal 4-12 cab. The power setting control know on the back of the amp is wonderful, allowing the Frenzel to sing without all the volume. Try as I could, it was impossible to get a bad sound out of the Super Deluxe.

On two different gigs with this amp, I was able to achieve sounds previously unattainable. My personal preference is an open back cab with 2 AlNiCo 10s, your preference may be different, but your results will be nevertheless stunning. My personal preference is somewhere in the (very expensive Vince Gill) sound, and achieving this was almost too easy with the Super Deluxe. A couple of analog pedals, a guitar, and a telecaster, and there I was – but when it was time to get dirty, the Frenzel responded with authority. The Frenzel Super Deluxe amp is the kind of tool that can make such impact that it allows you to become a better player. The price is far below what the value of the unit.

This amp also records beautifully. A couple of tracks already laid down for a local artist, one with some rapid fire chicken pickin' stuff, the other with a Les Paul Deluxe in the style of Merle Travis. A U47FET clone and a Jurassic EV omni dynamic captured the amp's sounds to the point there will be no need for further EQ or processing. It really is that good.

Niggles? Yes, but perhaps of my own choosing. I ordered the amp with the steel cage, the least expensive option, but am working with Jim Frenzel now to get my unit put into a more roadworthy wood head box. The face plate seems a bit fragile, as mine got a small crack on it when an errant case caught the corner at a gig. Again, superb support from Jim Frenzel to save the day

Conclusion: I don't say this lightly – Jim Frenzel's design is perhaps the best thing in the guitar amp world I personally have experienced in over 35 years of performing. The exceptional price (well under \$900 as detailed above) notwithstanding, the amp is a quality built product with impeccable detail in fit, finish, and most importantly, sound. Available only as a custom build from WWW.Frenzeltubeamps.com these things are in this reviewer's opinion as good as amplifiers will ever be, and then some. Check em out.

(Ken Morgan is a longtime musician, recording engineer, producer, and all around nuisance. He is a voting member of the Grammy, member of the Producers and Engineers Wing of the Grammy, and has written dozens of pro-audio equipment reviews for various online publications. Ken and his wife reside in Midland, TX)