

PRITCHARD AMPS SWORD OF SATORI

by Russell Carlson, Jazz Times

I'm not an Akira Kurosawa scholar, but I played one for about a year in college, long enough to know what *satori* means. The Japanese film luminary allowed damn near every one of his protagonists the experience: a moment of revelation when all the voices in your head quit playing Rashomon for just a second and shut up to let reason speak clearly and change the way you think forever.

And I'm no Sanshiro Sugata, but I reckon any Eastern sage would sermonize into infinity that a true satori is achieved only through the self - from hours of lonesome contemplation spent while stuck inside a lotus pond, for example.

Ah, screw all that noise. Satori can be achieved quickly and easily by material means. Eric Pritchard knows it. After all, he built the mean, green satori machine.

If you're a guitar-amp maker and name one of your amps the Sword of Satori - hell, if you are *anybody* and you name *anything* Sword of Satori - you're already stepping outside the box. Eric Pritchard is way outside the box [inside the box failed horribly]. He told me that during 15 years of research and prototype testing of his line of boutique guitar amps he would imagine speaking with fellow engineers with amp-design experience - and then do the exact opposite of what they advised. I raise a glass to brash attitude like this, and Pritchard's amps are evidence that we need more like him in the musical instrument industry.

The month and a half I spent with the Sword of Satori amp was an eye-opening period of time, during which I came to truly believe that tubes are unnecessary in order to achieve a clean, full, classic sound. To say that the Sword of Satori has "that tube sound" isn't correct. Anyone who has spent time maintaining a tube amp should know its characteristically glowing tone all too well to be fooled into thinking that Pritchard has performed the impossible alchemy of making transistors sound like tubes. The tone from the Sword, which varies depending on a slew of possible settings, has a foundation that's cleaner and less "wet" than what a tube amp supplies. [One tube effect was omitted because it has poor musical qualities and others were adjusted for best overall tone.] The fullness, depth, definition, complexity and volume, however, are all there.

How Pritchard achieved those characteristics was through an ingenious process of well-researched, expertly designed handmade circuitry. We're talking about nitty gritty tech-head stuff here, odd versus even harmonics and other subjects you'd be better off learning about from Pritchard's Web site, pritchardamps.com. What I can safely relate is that this amp provides tones that cover the guitar's range wonderfully, which is due also in part to his strange but smart choice in drivers. The Sword I tested had one 12-inch speaker and two five-inchers. Naturally, the 12 does the bulk of the work and, with the EQ set right, the fives can add a glistening effect to the tone's high end.

Jazz tone? The Sword has a setting especially for it. Two of the amp's many oven-style knobs are the Voice selectors (one for each channel) that supply access to a number of preset EQ settings that range from the "A" voice, which supplies an open, acoustic-ish tone, to the "L" voice, one you select for a cutting lead tone. Jazz players will find the most pleasure with both the "B" voice, a bass-boost setting that imparts a velvety mellowness neither too woofy nor bright, and, my favorite, the "S" voice, which moves the sound toward the classic jazz-box tone of the 1950s and 60s: smooth and even across the frequencies, and quite round-sounding. In addition, the Sword has settings for classic Fender, Marshall and Vox-type sounds that lend more bite, more punch. You can of course tailor the settings any which way you like using the



bass, mid and treble knobs present on each channel. The Sword also has a lovely spring reverb for an added luxurious effect. There's even a knob that allows for matching your guitar's output level [and your playing] to the amp's first gain stage - a nice touch that took some getting used to but nonetheless proved useful.

Aside from the amazing fullness of tone, I was also struck by how tight and articulate the Sword of Satori sounds. There's never any flab, and chord-work always sounded concise and punchy. But as concise as it is, the amp doesn't veil the individual notes in your clusters. Listen and you can hear each note of even a terribly dense chord. Depending on how many styles you play, the Sword of Satori could be the last amp you ever need: the two channels can have you flipping between jazz, blues and rock. The distortion sounds wonderful, not what you would expect from a transistor-based amplifier at all. It can give you just a little crunch or get downright nasty - a wattage control lets you push the amp to 180 watts of power [peak distorted power - 60 watts clean] - but it doesn't get metallically over-the-top. Think Stevie Ray Vaughan; that's about where it's at.

Besides all the glorious sound that Sword makes is the way it's built. Marbled-green tolex wrapping and a light cane grill, plus fancy gold labeling on the control plate, give it a handsome, retro look. The real kicker is Pritchard's I-beam inspired cabinet, which is quite sturdy and helps keep the amp's weight down - it's just over 40 pounds.

The Sword of Satori one of the most versatile amps in the Pritchard line. [The Gold Estoc also has two channels, modern and vintage.] Others sport equally wicked names like Black Dagger Blood Dagger, Jade Dagger and Sultry Margaux and are sure to sound equally amazing because they take advantage of the same technology as the Sword. Guitarists in need of excellent amplification and a possible life-changing experience ought to seek one out.

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