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# '81 Special

Smallbox Model / Standard Model / Lead Model

## Classic Series

Fixed-Biased Tube Amplifier

50-Watt Head

- or -

1x12 Combo / 2x12 Combo

- or -

100-Watt Head

## Owner's Manual

[www.sonictoneamps.com](http://www.sonictoneamps.com)

Made in the USA

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# Introduction

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I'd like to personally thank you for purchasing the SonicTone '81 Special tube amplifier. I know how important every player's tone is to them and that consideration goes into every amp. Carefully designed and hand-built here in the U.S., the '81 Special represents the arrival of a new wave of rock and metal sounds that exploded on the scene in the early 1980's. From early break-up crunches to a tight, rich harmonic overdrive, this amp will deliver some fantastic tones for you to use when playing live or in the studio. Good luck and enjoy the amp!

Sincerely,



Nick Sagona

## Safety Instructions

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1. Always use the correct types of tubes for this amplifier.
2. Always match the impedance to correct value of the speaker load.
3. Do not attempt to bypass the fuses or use different fuse values.
4. Please only use the provided SonicTone footswitch, which is compatible with this amplifier.
5. Please only use the correct cable to connect the footswitch to the amplifier.
6. Please operate the amplifier in dry and safe conditions.
7. Please store the amplifier in a reasonable, climate-controlled environment.
8. Prolonged exposure to high sound levels may cause permanent hearing loss. Please take the necessary precautions. See page 6 for more information.
9. If you are experiencing issues with the amplifier, please have it worked on by a qualified service technician only. Do not attempt to open the amp and work on it yourself.

### ⚡ WARNING! ⚡

Dangerous and potentially lethal voltages may be present in the amplifier even after it has been turned off and unplugged. Do not open the amp yourself or touch the inside of it. Only have a qualified service technician open up and work on the amplifier.

# Features

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The '81 Special is a fixed-biased tube amplifier that uses 12AX7 preamp tubes and EL34 power tubes. The 50-watt model uses two (2) EL34 power tubes and the 100-watt model uses (4) EL34 power tubes. The features include:

- 2 channels with independent gain controls (footswitchable)
- Shared 3-band EQ with presence
- Master volume
- Bright switch on channel 1
- Classic/Hotrod switch on channel 2
- 3-way output impedance switch (16, 8 or 4 ohm)
- 12" Celestion speaker(s) (*combo versions only*)
- Birch plywood cabinet with finger-jointed construction

Smallbox	Lead	Standard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Three (3) 12AX7s</li><li>• Bypassable FX loop</li><li>• 1-button footswitch</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Four (4) 12AX7s</li><li>• Solo boost control, bypassable and footswitchable</li><li>• Bypassable tube-driven FX loop</li><li>• Mono preamp out &amp; mono power amp in jacks</li><li>• 2-button footswitch</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Four (4) 12AX7s</li><li>• Bypassable and footswitchable tube-driven FX loop</li><li>• FX loop series/parallel switch with send and return controls</li><li>• Mono preamp out &amp; mono power amp in jacks</li><li>• 2-button footswitch</li></ul>

## Footswitch Operation

### Standard/Lead:

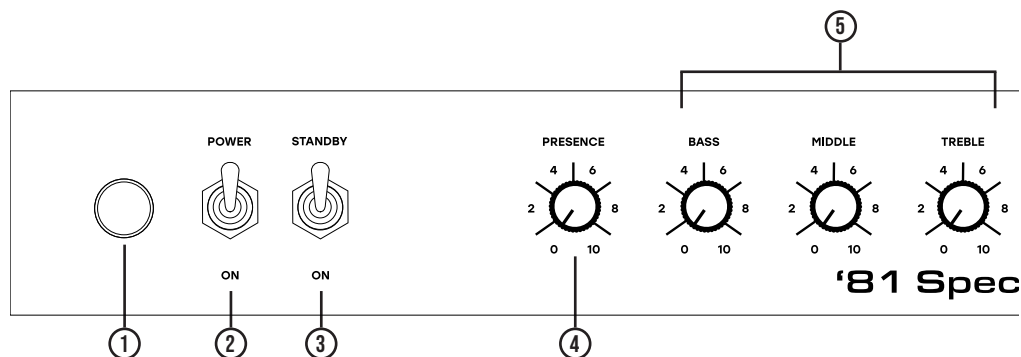
The 2-button footswitch requires an active 5-pin DIN cable to be inserted into the footswitch jack on the rear panel as well as the jack on the footswitch. In order for the footswitch to operate correctly, the corresponding switches on the amp must be set to the OFF position. The left button (orange LED) engages channel 2.

On the Standard model, the right button (green LED) engages the FX loop. On the Lead model, the right button (red LED) engages the solo boost.

### Smallbox:

The 1-button footswitch requires a 1/4" TRS cable to be inserted into the footswitch jack on the rear panel as well as the jack on the footswitch. The "CH 1 / CH 2" switch on the front panel is automatically defeated if the footswitch cable is plugged into the footswitch jack on the rear panel.

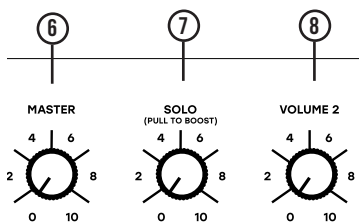
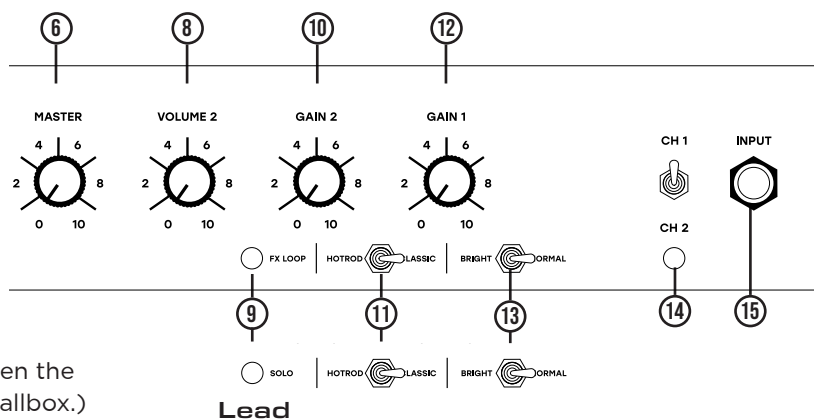
# Front Panel



1. **Pilot Light** – illuminates when the amp is turned on.
2. **Power Switch** – turns the amp on.
3. **Standby Switch** – allows the amp to be played. When the standby is off, the tubes are kept warm, but the amp will not make any sound.
4. **Presence** – active tonal control that can be used to brighten up the amp’s overall sound.
5. **Bass, Middle and Treble** – passive equalization controls to adjust the tone of the amp.

6. **Master** – the overall master volume of the amp.
7. **Solo Boost Level & Switch (Lead Model Only)\*** – control to adjust the level of the solo boost. Pull out to activate.

8. **Volume 2** – control to adjust the overall volume on channel 2.
9. **FX Loop or Solo Boost LED** – illuminates when the feature is engaged. (Not available on the Smallbox.)

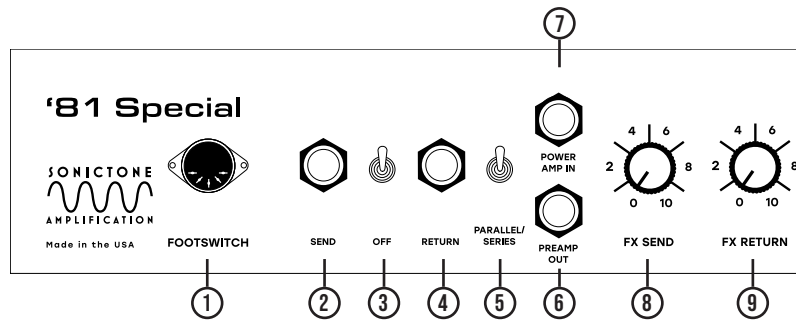


## Special Lead

\* The solo boost is an additive volume boost for channel 2 only. When channel 2 is engaged, it works in conjunction with the master volume and can provide up to a 12dB boost, depending on the level of the master volume.

10. **Gain 2** – control to adjust the amount of gain on channel 2.
11. **Hotrod/Classic** – switch to engage a bolder tone on channel 2. In “Hotrod” mode, channel 2 will have additional gain and a more aggressive, slightly brighter voicing.
12. **Gain 1** – control to adjust the amount of gain on channel 1.
13. **Bright Switch** – switch to engage a slightly brighter tone for channel 1.
14. **CH 1 / CH 2 Switch & LED** – switch to change between channels 1 and 2 when not using the footswitch. The LED illuminates when channel 2 is engaged.
15. **Input Jack** – mono input jack to plug your guitar into.

# Rear Panel



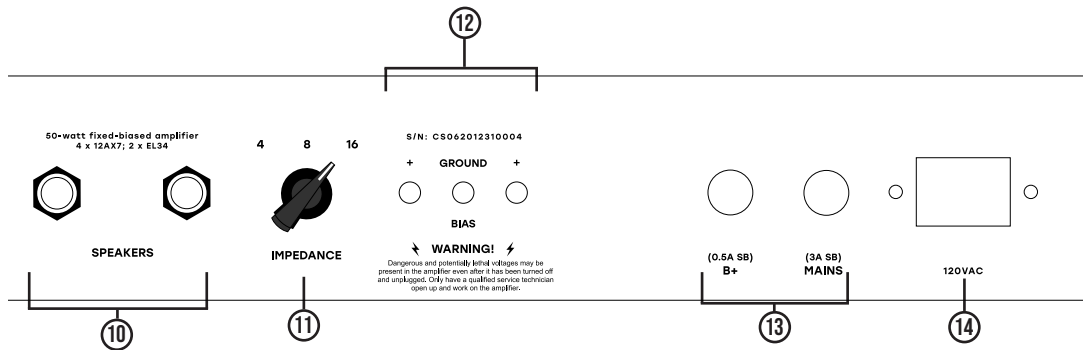
1. **Footswitch Jack** – jack to plug the provided footswitch cable into (5-PIN DIN or 1/4" TRS on the Smallbox)
2. **FX Loop Send Jack** – mono input jack for the FX loop instrument level send signal.
3. **FX Loop Bypass Switch** – switch to fully bypass the FX loop circuit.
4. **FX Loop Return Jack** – mono input jack for the FX loop instrument level return signal.
5. **FX Series/Parallel Switch (Standard Model Only)** – switch to operate the FX loop in either series or parallel mode. In parallel mode, the original signal is allowed to pass through unaffected and the send control acts as a “wet/dry blend” to mix the level of affected signal into the mix with the unaffected signal. In parallel, depending on the amount of “wet” signal set by the send control, the overall signal may be louder due to the dry and wet signals being mixed together. In this scenario, it is recommended to use the return control to balance out the overall volume.
6. **Preamp Out** – mono unbalanced output jack to send the post-FX loop line level signal to another external unit or power amp. *(Not available on the Smallbox model.)*
7. **Power Amp In** – mono unbalanced input jack to send a line level preamp signal from another amp into the power amp of this amp. Once a line is plugged into this jack, the internal preamp is disconnected and the power amp will only amplify the incoming external preamp signal. *(Not available on the Smallbox model.)*
8. **FX Loop Send Level (Standard Model Only)** – control to adjust the level of the send signal to the FX chain.
9. **FX Loop Return Level (Standard Model Only)** – control to adjust the level of the return signal to the amp.

**A note about the FX Loop** – When the FX loop is off (bypassed), the entire signal will bypass the FX loop circuit altogether. However, the send and return jacks are switched jacks that are connected together internally when nothing is plugged into them. Therefore, when the FX loop is on, signal will be allowed to pass through the FX loop even if nothing is plugged into it. If the FX loop is on but not being used, the return control on the **Standard Model** can be used as an additional volume control to reduce the volume when the FX loop is on, and then boost the volume when the FX loop is switched off using the footswitch. This will effectively provide a volume “boost” option.

**A note about the insert points (Standard & Lead Models)** – It is important to make a distinction between the FX loop and the “preamp out/power amp in” jacks. The FX loop is a lower instrument level signal designed for FX units and requires the “make-up” gain of the return stage. The “preamp out/power amp in” insert point is post-FX loop and is a higher line level signal that needs no recovery stage. The two insert points have different purposes and behave differently because of this.

In summary, the FX loop is designed to feed external FX units via the send jack and receive the processed instrument level signal to the return jack. The “preamp out/power amp in” insert point is designed to feed other power amps, or receive a line level signal from another preamp.

## Rear Panel (continued)



10. **Parallel Speaker Jacks** – mono input jacks to plug the speaker(s) into. PLEASE NOTE: The jacks are in parallel, so if you plug two equal impedance speaker loads into them, you must set the impedance switch to half their impedance. For example, with two 16 ohm speaker loads plugged in, the impedance switch should be set to 8 ohms.
11. **Impedance Selector Switch** – switch to select the correct impedance of the speaker load hooked up to the amp.
12. **Bias Probes** – test jacks to check the approximate bias point of each power tube in millivolts (mV).\*
13. **Fuse Holders** – receptacles for the amp's fuses.
14. **AC Jack** – jack to plug the provided AC cord into.

### \*Important Note About Biasing:

The value given at the bias probes represents the voltage drop across an internal 1 ohm resistor attached to the cathode of each power tube. Using Ohm's law ( $V = IR$ ), the value in millivolts (mV) can easily be converted to milliamps (mA) to get the approximate cathode current. For example, a reading of 40mV would equal 40mA. Power tube cathode current can act as a set point for adjusting the amplifier's bias. This is only an approximation to guide you in checking and setting the bias of the amp, as other factors go into calculating an amp's bias, such as the available plate voltage and max plate dissipation of the power tubes. Before leaving the shop, all SonicTone amplifiers are biased by measuring the plate voltage and plate current, and using those values to properly set the plate dissipation of the power tubes at idle.

The bias pot is located on the top of the amp chassis near the power tubes. As always, please have a qualified technician service the amp and set the bias accordingly. When biasing the amp, all measurements should be performed with the amplifier warmed, set to play mode and with all controls set to zero.

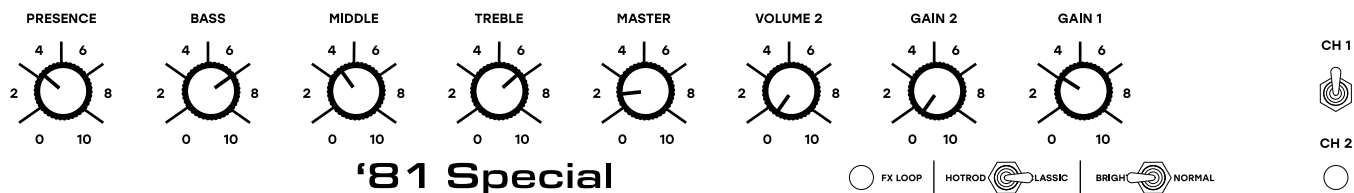
### ! HIGH SOUND LEVEL WARNING !

Guitar amplifiers produce extremely high sound levels. Any prolonged exposure to high sound levels may cause permanent hearing loss. Please take care to use proper hearing protection when operating and playing through a SonicTone amplifier. For more information on exposure to extreme sound levels and its effects, please visit the [OSHA website here](#).

# Sample Settings

## Channel 1 - Warm Clean:

PRESENCE    BASS    MIDDLE    TREBLE    MASTER    VOLUME 2    GAIN 2    GAIN 1



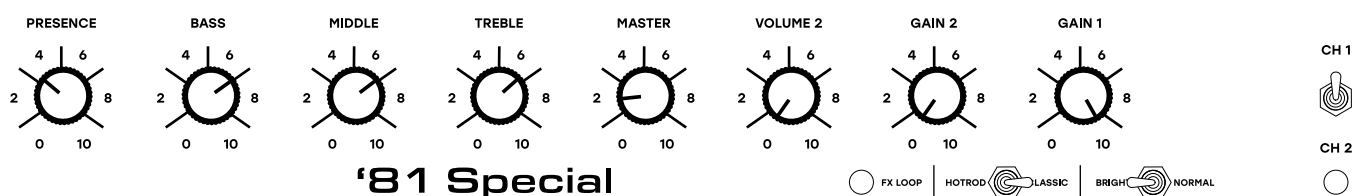
**'81 Special**

FX LOOP    HOTROD    CLASSIC    BRIGHT    NORMAL

CH 1    CH 2

## Channel 1 - Edge of Breakup:

PRESENCE    BASS    MIDDLE    TREBLE    MASTER    VOLUME 2    GAIN 2    GAIN 1



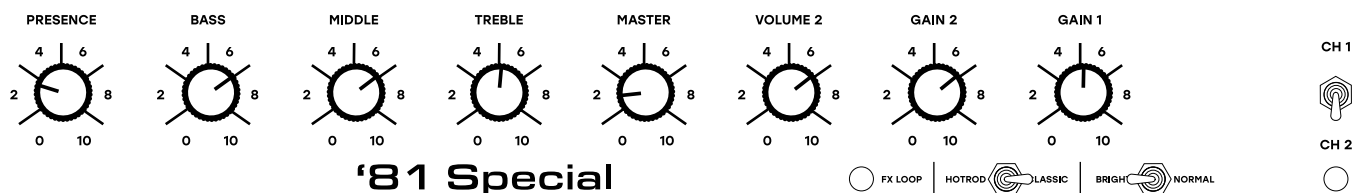
**'81 Special**

FX LOOP    HOTROD    CLASSIC    BRIGHT    NORMAL

CH 1    CH 2

## Channel 2 - Blues Crunch:

PRESENCE    BASS    MIDDLE    TREBLE    MASTER    VOLUME 2    GAIN 2    GAIN 1



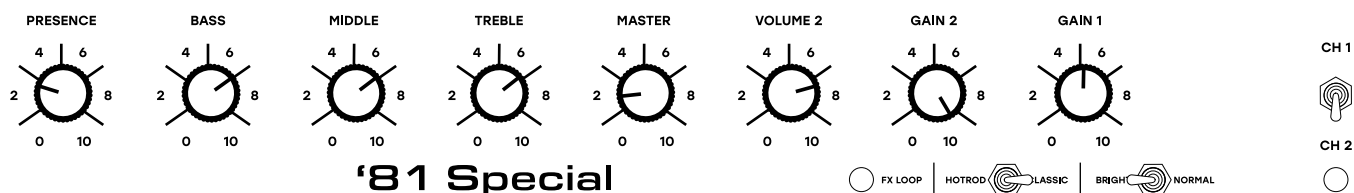
**'81 Special**

FX LOOP    HOTROD    CLASSIC    BRIGHT    NORMAL

CH 1    CH 2

## Channel 2 - Classic Rock:

PRESENCE    BASS    MIDDLE    TREBLE    MASTER    VOLUME 2    GAIN 2    GAIN 1



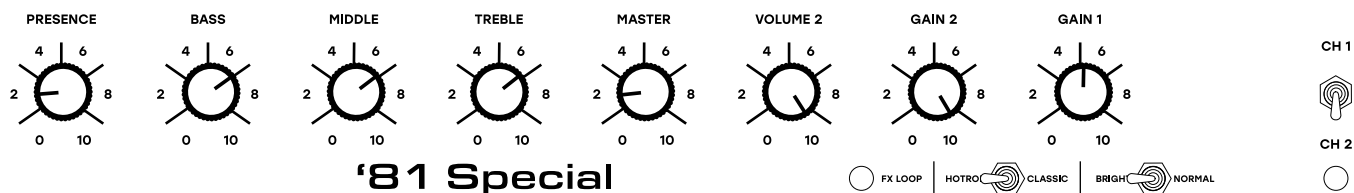
**'81 Special**

FX LOOP    HOTROD    CLASSIC    BRIGHT    NORMAL

CH 1    CH 2

## Channel 2 - Hard Rock:

PRESENCE    BASS    MIDDLE    TREBLE    MASTER    VOLUME 2    GAIN 2    GAIN 1



**'81 Special**

FX LOOP    HOTROD    CLASSIC    BRIGHT    NORMAL

CH 1    CH 2



## 2-Year Limited Warranty

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This amplifier is protected with a limited, 2-year warranty for any and all defective issues with the build workmanship and parts, excluding tubes, transformers and speakers. The warranty does not cover general wear and tear, neglect, misuse or abuse, damage from liquids (water, alcohol, etc.), disasters, acts of God or unauthorized modifications. Any modifications made to the amp by the owner or a technician will void the warranty. The owner is responsible for all warranty shipping costs. Once the warranty work is completed, the customer will be notified and sent a final shipping invoice. The owner then is required to pay the shipping invoice to have the repaired amp shipped back to them. Returned warranty shipping will be insured and will require a signature.

### **! NOTICE !**

Tube amplifiers are voltage-sensitive devices that require a certain amount of AC input voltage (VAC.) If the provided input voltage is too low, the amplifier may not function properly. If the provided input voltage too high, it may damage the amplifier. Please take care to ensure that the correct AC input voltage is provided to the amplifier. See the **specifications** section of this manual for more info.

# Specifications

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**Product Series:** Classic Series

**Product Model:** '81 Special Head, 1x12 Combo or 2x12 Combo

## AC Input & Fuses:

- Standard IEC jack for U.S. 120VAC (International 240VAC)
- Slo-blo mains fuse: US 120VAC **50W** - 3A; **100W** - 4A (International 240VAC **50W/100W** - 2A)
- Slo-blo high voltage (B+) fuse: **50W** - 0.5A; **100W** - 1A

## Tubes & Power Output:

### 50-watt Smallbox Model

- Three (3) 12AX7 preamp tubes
- Two (2) EL34 power tubes
- 50W @ 16, 8 or 4 ohms

### 50-watt Model

- Four (4) 12AX7 preamp tubes
- Two (2) EL34 power tubes
- 50W @ 16, 8 or 4 ohms

### 100-watt Model

- Four (4) 12AX7 preamp tubes
- Four (4) EL34 power tubes
- 100W @ 16, 8 or 4 ohms

## Speakers:

- 12-inch Celestion speaker(s), wired for 16 ohm or 8 ohm (*combo versions only*)

## Footswitch:

### Smallbox Model

- 1-button SonicTone footswitch
- 1/4" TRS cable

### Standard/Lead Model

- 2-button SonicTone footswitch
- 5-pin active DIN cable

## Dimensions:

### Smallbox Model

#### 50W Head

- Width: 24 in
- Height: 10.75 in
- Depth: 9 in
- Weight: 29.5 lbs

#### 50W 1x12 Combo

- Width: 24 in
- Height: 20.75 in
- Depth: 10 in
- Weight: 51.0 lbs

### Standard/Lead Model

#### 50W Head

- Width: 30 in
- Height: 10.75 in
- Depth: 9 in
- Weight: 32.5 lbs

#### 100W Head

- Width: 30 in
- Height: 10.75 in
- Depth: 9 in
- Weight: 42.5 lbs

#### 50W 2x12 Combo

- Width: 30 in
- Height: 20.75 in
- Depth: 10 in
- Weight: 55.0 lbs



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