

Rivera Silent Sister Isolation Cabinet Review

September 18, 2009

In the beginning, amps started out as low-wattage affairs with just enough power to project the guitar in a relatively small venue. Soon, the need for more power gave us amps that pushed hundreds of watts. When that wasn't enough, amps were daisy-chained in order to be heard in arenas. When PA systems became more efficient, it was possible to amplify music with a lot less power on the guitar amp side. However, recording studio owners desired lower volume amps, which resulted in the design of the master volume. The logical progression of the master volume lead to attenuators, and later power scaling, and then full circle right back to low-wattage amps. Many guitarists have continued the love affair with big, loud amps, yet are having a hard time finding places that will let us wind up our beloved rigs to record them in all their glory, especially at home! And now that many studios reside in homes or areas that require sensitivity to volume, what are we to do?

One decidedly analog approach to reducing volume in our increasingly digital world is the use of an isolation cabinet. The concept is simple: a speaker inside of a box that is sealed up tight and treated acoustically to keep the sound in, or at least to heavily attenuate the signal. By design, iso cabs are made for recording. People have been using iso cabs for years with some success, but the main issue that plagues the majority of iso cabs is a boxy sound. The problem is, by trying to keep sound from escaping the box you have to seal it as tight as a drum, resulting in trapped air that doesn't let the speaker or the mic breathe like they do in an open room. Top that off with a metric ton of acoustic deadening material and a very small enclosed space, and you have a recipe for muffled tone. Lucky for us the folks at Rivera have a solution.

Your sister is built!

Built of hardwood-core plywood and covered in black Nyflex carpet, the Silent Sister is road-rugged and measures 16"x20"x30". Rivera added comfortable leather handles on the top and sides of the cabinet, as well as rollers that allow you to easily tote it around like a suitcase on wheels. Inside is a Celestion G12T-75 8-ohm speaker that is pre-wired to a jack panel on the backside of the cab for easy connection to an amp. The two pre-wired microphone goosenecks terminate on a panel with two Neutrik XLR connectors. Access to the goosenecks and speaker comes through the top of the cab with a hinged door that locks with a twist-lock latch. The top door makes it easy to open and adjust the two mics to whatever position you desire without having to get down on your knees to look inside. What really separates the Silent Sister from other iso cabs is a cleverly devised porting/ air labyrinth system that relieves the effects of pressure build-up in a small enclosure while reducing the external volume by about 30dB. Additionally, the design makes use of specifically chosen angles to minimize standing waves and reflections.

Can we get a little quiet, please?

This is the type of device that I've dreamed about for years, hoping it would keep the cops from busting down the door because some neighbor didn't appreciate my riffs. The first test was to see what kind of reduction the Silent Sister provided with my JCM800 100- watt head. Because the speaker inside is a 75-watt, I used the very unscientific approach of not turning the amp up all the way, just to get a feel for the volume without blowing the head or speaker. Setting the amp with the gain on 10 and the master at about 3 you could hear sound coming through the box but it was significantly reduced in volume and for

the most part only produced a muffled bassy sound at talking levels. Opening the top lid showed how loud the amp was—night and day with the lid closed. Just to be safe, I engaged a THD Hotplate inline and shaved 4dB off the signal, then cranked the master up to 10. At this point the outside volume was higher than before (obviously) but considering how loud the amp would be without the Silent Sister, it was a comfortable level. You could talk over the volume; it was about the same as watching a football game in your entertainment room with a couple of the guys. Once again I popped the lid open and got a blast of what was happening inside the box. Big, big difference.

This is not the setting you'd want to have with the family sleeping in the other room. Although it's named the Silent Sister, it should be pointed out that it brings down the volume significantly but does not eliminate it. For a chore like that you'd need a lot more mass, weight and size. Just look in any major studio construction, and you'll quickly see how much work and money goes into keeping things quiet.



The next and most important part of the tests came with actually recording various amps to check out the tone inside the box. As I mentioned, the Silent Sister comes with two goosenecks and connections for two mics. This is great for those of us who like to blend mic combinations for a wider range of tones. With the JCM800 still plugged in, I hooked up an SM57 and ran it through my Chandler LTD-1 preamp and straight to Pro Tools. Opening up a track and listening through my studio monitors with the Silent Sister in the other room, I was treated to a stunningly open, bright and full sound. Impressive. The sound was instantly familiar. There was no stuffiness or boxy quality to the sound, and it didn't exhibit the congested tone of other iso cabs I've used. Tone is subjective and a matter of preference, but to me, it sounded very much like a close-mic'd 4x12 with 75s inside.

Some good news for players preferring a different speaker: it's merely two solder joints away from replacing with your favorite speaker choice. Of course, you will always need to be aware of the power ratings and how much you are pushing—nobody wants to blow their Celestion Blue by cranking a Dual Rectifier through it. Be careful and use the same common sense you would with a 1x12 cab and your favorite head.

It's what's inside that counts

Over several weeks I recorded a Carol Ann OD2r head, various Marshall Super Leads, a Mesa Dual Rectifier and an Engl Ritchie Blackmore signature head, all with terrific results. Standing next to the Sister and hearing the low woofy sound coming through it can be deceiving. More than a few times I found myself pulling the bass down and cranking the treble and presence on the amp to accommodate

for the outside sound, only to realize how bright it was in the recording. Don't let the outside sound fool you; it's a byproduct of the way it attenuates the signal. It's what's inside that counts, and that sound is about as close as I've ever heard to a speaker being mic'd up in a pro studio environment.

For solution-minded gigging guitarists who are sick of being told to turn down by the sound tech, the Silent Sister is a must-have. Being able to set up your tone with the mic positioned just the way you like it—so you can plug right into the mic pre of the house mixer—is probably the best way to get predictable results and a killer tone at every gig. You'll make friends with the club and sound great in the process. I've seen bands that have used iso cabs to great success on the concert circuit. As far back as the '90s, bands like Garbage traveled with this setup, and the sound was the best I'd heard in years. It's a little different and may take some getting used to, but in the right circumstance it can make all the difference in the world.

The Final Mojo

Rivera has a winning product with the Silent Sister. Whether you're a studio cat that doesn't have a separate iso room, a player with more high-powered amps than understanding neighbors, or just somebody looking for high quality and real-world mic'd amp tones for your next project, the Silent Sister delivers. Is it 100 percent silent? No. But pulling 30dB out of a blaringly loud amp is no small feat without the use of an attenuator or master volume, and the guys at Rivera have done it in style, and without losing the ability to pull off killer recorded tones. It's expensive if you compare it to the price of a single 1x12 speaker cab, but cheap if you consider the cost of building a room that would allow you to accomplish what the Silent Sister does. Thanks Rivera, you just made my recording life a lot better. Now, where's my Super Lead!

Buy if...

you need to record loud amps in volume-sensitive locations.

Skip if...

you tour with Deep Purple and three stacks of Marshall Majors is just enough power to be heard.

Rating...

