

## **Amazona.de Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC review**

### **With distortion to unimaginable sounds!**

How times change. For decades, sound engineers of all backgrounds did everything imaginable to avoid overloads and minimize distortion when recording, especially in the early days of recording technology. The analogue equipment based on tubes induced almost a latent saturation, which in turn resulted in significant compression of the material, especially at the mixdown, serving as a first "mastering stage" long before this production step was planned as the final part of a sound recording. Overload-proof equipment is no longer a special feature these days. Instead, people sometimes try to give the audio material the decisive "kick" with a dedicated smooth clipping at the right point. With the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC, the Canadian company Sonic Farm has a saturation preamplifier in its portfolio that offers far more unique selling points than just saturation.

### **The concept of the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC**

The fact that the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC is not the usual 19-inch semiconductor equipment becomes clear as soon as you unpack the product. With a weight of almost 8 kg and an installation depth of 34 cm, it weighs closer to a 1U rack power amp than a typical preamp. Nevertheless, the product is a 2-channel microphone preamp and saturator for processing microphone, line and instrument signals, which is based on a Class A tube circuit with EF86 tubes.

The addition "JC" stands for the signature version designed for engineer and producer Joe Chiccarelli, who achieved his greatest successes with artists such as Alanis Morissette, Elton John, the Bee Gees, Journey and Frank Zappa and whose name, according to Wikipedia, is responsible for over 50 million albums sold which I can hardly imagine, since the Bee Gees' "Saturday Night Fever" soundtrack alone, which he mixed, has already sold over 40 million units. Reasons enough to tailor a signature version of the regular Xcalibur to the man.

One of the special features of the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC is the possibility of cascading the two channels, which can be activated by a mini toggle switch in the middle of the front panel. In this way you can combine the two saturation levels and arrive at a lush, all-out distortion. The fact that Sonic Farm has put a lot of thought into clipping is shown not only by the use of the two pentodes per channel with up to +68 dB of gain for microphone inputs and +48 dB for line and instrument signals, but also by the optional use of FET transistors for the distortion. One of the distinguishing features of FET transistors when it comes to clipping is that beyond 0 dB they do not induce a harsh distortion like regular bipolar transistors, but rather yield a much softer distortion not unlike that of tubes. The output levels of the channels can be adjusted separately, with the preamp working with Cinemag output transformers.

## The front panel of the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC

Anyone expecting a pure 19" distortion device will be disappointed. An impressive number of controls and switches on the front panel also reveals that the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC is about a high-end preamp performance as well. The first three pushbutton switches on the left offer the standard phantom power (48 V), a PAD switch of 15 dB and an instrument selector switch that activates the XLR line inputs and the front panel ¼" jack input.

The following three knobs "CLN" (Clean), "DRV" (Drive) and "BLD" (Blend) in conjunction with several toggle switches form the basis for the degree and type of distortion and its mix with the clean signal, with a two-color LED red / green indicating the input level.

Attention, the type of distortion in the red area is not desired, it only indicates that the input level is too high. There follows another selector switch for the output, where you can choose between a low-distortion solid state IC or a transformer, followed by a phase switch.

The top row of the Xcalibur JC is dominated by a total of 7 toggle switches, all of which have three switching states. Starting with a Fat Shelving Preset Boost and Gain Max switch on the left, the switch in the left (Fat) position provides low-frequency shelving boost from 300 to 1,000 Hz, depending on the setting of the Gain switch two positions to the right, where a lower gain corresponds to a higher corner frequency and consequently more bass boost. This filter does not use a separate stage but uses the clean tube gain stage. The boost level can be adjusted using the left of two trim pots, accessible from the top cover and located between the boost switches about half an inch from the front panel. The maximum gain also depends on the gain switch, the lower the gain switch, the more bass boost available, up to about 12dB, 6dB/octave slope.

The high-frequency shelving boost from 1 to 8 kHz, referred to here as "AIR", is also dependent on the Gain switch setting, with lower gain corresponding to a lower corner frequency and consequently more high-frequency boost. In the left position, the corner frequency is about 1.5 octaves lower than in the right position. This filter also affects the gain stage of the clean tube. Here, too, the exact degree of use can be set using a trimming potentiometer inside the housing.

After the said GAIN switch we come to the microphone input impedance switch "IMPED.". The lower the impedance, the higher the load that the preamp input puts on the microphone. The default values are 10 kΩ for the middle position (HI), 900 Ω for the left (LO) and 2,400 Ω for the right (MED). The "PAD" switch also affects the resulting microphone input impedance value. Changing the input impedance is more likely to affect the sound of dynamic mics, to some extent ribbon mics, and to a lesser extent or not at all condenser mics. With lower impedance values, the highs are usually reduced a little.

A subsequent high-pass cuts off at 160 Hz (pos. 1) or 80 Hz (pos. 2) with 6 dB / octave. Only the clean signal is processed by this high pass. The subsequent Odf / Odf1 switch is a high-pass filter before the overdrive stage, which can be useful if too much bass or low mids hit the OD

tube and cause too much "mud". In this case you can attenuate the unwanted bass or mids with this 6dB / octave filter with a mild slope. The individual positions affect the filter to be: fully on (left); Bass and low mids attenuated (middle) and just bass attenuated (right).

Depending on the instrument, interesting effects can be achieved here, especially in the Lo-Fi area. Another feature is in the tone-shaping of the OD+ switch. It affects the degree and the quality of saturation. The mid and the left position are 2 gain levels of the tube distortion. The right position (2) adds the JFET clipping stage post the tubes.

The Odf2 is unique to the JC Signature version. It is a post-drive low-pass filter with a 3-position premix: 5.5 kHz, 12dB/octave (left), 18 kHz (middle) and 1 kHz, 6dB/octave (right). The first position can be used to eliminate hum distortion that can occur when processing some signals. The middle position is a low-pass filter with a corner frequency of 16kHz, so practically a bypass. The right position is useful when you want to mix in some saturation to make something sound bigger and fat without the distortion being too obvious.

## What connections does the Xcalibur JC offer?

The back of the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC is quickly dealt with: 6x XLR, 4 in, 2 out, L/R microphone, L/R line, ground lift, main fuse, power selector switch, IEC socket. Clear, self-explanatory, all good!

As you can see, the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC offers a very extensive signal processing, which enables comprehensive sound manipulation. Considering the many overtone possibilities that a distorted signal offers, this is truly useful.

## Use of the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC

With what is probably the hardest on/off switch I have ever pressed in my life, we power up the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC and are greeted with a powerful red glow. To say it straight away, as a man of 6 strings, the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC immediately puts a big smile on my face, as the quality of the distortion is indeed excellent. Especially with instruments where the treble is not too strong, such as Hammond Organ or Clavinet, the box delivers very good sounds right from the get-go, which are easily in the range of a high-gain guitar amp in terms of distortion, but with significantly less background noise. The choice to subsequently add a speaker simulation to the signal path is yours, but even without any sound processing, as in the sound examples, the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC is convincing across the board.

(followed by audio samples; to hear them, please go to:

<https://www.amazona.de/test-sonic-farm-xcalibur-jc-saturation-mikrofonvorverstaerker/> )

Of course, the product can also deliver a decent tape saturation type of fattening, but the high gain reserves do indeed offer a unique selling point in the preamp section. Due to the extensive

filter options, there really is something here for everyone and what may still be missing in terms of sound options is easily taken care of by an upstream or downstream EQ.  
An outstanding product!

## **Conclusion**

With the Sonic Farm Xcalibur JC, the Canadian manufacturer has an excellent preamp with a focus on saturation in its portfolio, which easily achieves the grade of a high-quality distortion. The components used, along with processing and sound possibilities, are in the absolute top league and enable characterful and formative sounds, which also help thin sounds gain traction. A top-notch product, an absolute recommendation!