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still
phenomenal
and affordable**

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the ToneQuest

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Report™

The Weighty Two Eighty

"We like this kind of music. Jazz is strictly for stay-at-homes."

– Buddy Holly

The universe of classic guitar amplifiers presents a fascinating array of celestial sounds in every conceivable package you can imagine. Some of the earliest guitar amplifiers built by Gibson and National (Valco) in the late '40s are surprisingly toneful little beasts – virtually devoid of usable headroom, yes, but earnest and willing nonetheless for those of us who appreciate the singing voice of tube-driven distortion held aloft by cascading torrents of orgasmic electrons. Throughout the early and mid '50s (the Fender TV front era), guitar amp builders were churning out thousands of such economical 'student' amps with limited potential dictated by parts costs, labor, and price point, while



the circuits in the bigger 'professional' amps were constantly being tweaked to achieve more power and less distortion at the increasing volume levels required for live performances. By the late '50s, Fender had attained a dominant position in amplifier sales, nudging aside brands like Gibson,

www.tonequest.com

Premier, Danelectro, Rickenbacker, various Valco models, and another Los Angeles manufacturer that had successfully exploited the lap steel and guitar amplifier market since the late 1940s – Magnatone.

Most players today are familiar with Magnatone for having been the first (and only) manufacturer to ever create true pitch-shifting vibrato, as opposed to the tremolo (amplitude modulation) found on '50s and '60s Fender amps. The flagship Magnatone 280 model with stereo vibrato was first introduced in 1957 at a price of \$395.00 (\$3,000 today adjusted for inflation) featuring dual Oxford Alnico 12" model 12L5-N1 speakers, a pair of midrange tweeters, and dual Schumacher output transformers feeding the stereo vibrato. In every respect, the Magnatone 280 was priced and over-built for professional guitar and accordion players, but despite its hefty weight, intricate circuit and beefy transformer set, the 280 remained somewhat under-powered when compared to the big amps being built in Fullerton.

In 1962 the original Magna Electronics company located in Inglewood, CA was acquired by Estey Manufacturing, a century-old manufacturer of reed organs and accordions in Brattleboro, VT. The Magnatone 280-A was built in Torrance, CA through 1962 utiliz-

<p>\$299.95*</p> <p>REVERBERATION AT ITS BEST</p> <p>A true hi-fi professional model designed to produce magnificent sound. The exclusive vibrato system and the amazing Hammond Reverbation Unit provide true "concert hall" tones from deep rumble bass to brilliant highs.</p>  <p>SPECIFICATIONS: 2 tubes, 25 watt undistorted output ■ 1 custom-designed extended range 12" hi-fi speaker ■ 12" oval midrange speaker with high frequency driver ■ 2 input channels with individual address and tone controls ■ Each channel has 2 reverb jacks—one for high gain and one for low gain ■ Each channel has 2 vibrato jacks ■ Stereo input jack between two channels ■ Vibrato system, patent No. 2,992,224 ■ 2 vibrato controls—one for intensity, one for speed ■ Outside foot switch jack for remote control of vibrato ■ Hammond Reverbation System with variable control and foot switch jacks for use on AC line ■ Stereo speaker jack ■ Pilot light, 150V, high 250W long, Approx. Wt. 40 lbs.</p>	<p>\$239.95*</p> <p>REVERBERATION AT ITS BEST</p> <p>The outstanding multi-feature professional amplifier at a price never before possible. It features the sensational Hammond Reverbation System which gives echo or "concert hall" acoustics—and Magnatone's exclusive vibrato system.</p>  <p>SPECIFICATIONS: 2 tubes, 25 watt undistorted output ■ 1 custom-designed extended range 12" speaker ■ 2 input channels with individual address control and 2 input tone and channel and one variable tone control for both ■ Vibrato system, Patent No. 2,992,224 ■ 2 vibrato controls—one for intensity, one for speed ■ Stereo input jack between two channels ■ Vibrato system, patent No. 2,992,224 ■ 2 vibrato controls—one for intensity, one for speed ■ Outside foot switch jack for remote control of vibrato ■ Hammond Reverbation System with variable control and foot switch jacks for use on AC line ■ Stereo speaker jack ■ Pilot light, 150V, high 250W long, Approx. Wt. 40 lbs.</p>
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*F.O.B. factory prices subject to change. prices slightly higher in some areas.

ing the identical cabinet design, circuit and components found in the earlier Magna 280s. In 1962-63 Estey introduced the 'Masterpiece 400' Series (410, 415, 435, 440, 450, 460 and 480) featuring Hammond reverb and the continuation of true pitch shifting vibrato. Estey also produced amplifiers for accordion companies under different names, including Tonemaster, Titano, PANaramic, Twilighter, Pac-Amp (identical to the 280-A) and DaVinci. The Magnatone '4 Series' amps built in 1962-1963 arguably represent the 'golden era' in Magnatone amplifier history, as described by Magnatone fan and guest contributor Jeff Morris:

Model 440 Mercury

The Magnatone 440 is powered by a pair of 6V6GT's and puts out approximately 20 watts. The stock speaker is an Alnico magnet equipped Oxford model number 12K5. Its features place this amp in direct competition with the Fender Deluxe Reverb, so how do the two stack up? In this writer's opinion the 440's reverb circuit is a drastic improvement over



Fender's design. While Fender reverb can sound "surfy" and "boingy" at almost any setting, the Magnatone circuit is the epitome of a smooth, natural sounding effect that doesn't sound "added-on", but more like an integral part of the sound.

With a three-knob Fender stand-alone reverb unit you can dial out much of this "boinginess" by dialing the Tone knob back, but with the single knob, reverb-equipped Fender amps there's no dialing it out. In the Magnatone circuit there's no need – just sweet, smooth reverb that sounds as natural as any effect ever created for guitar. The tremolo of the Fender Deluxe Reverb is standard on/off amplitude modulation while the vibrato of the Magnatone is true pitch shifting vibrato. Both are usable and pleasing to the ear in the right context, but for my money I'll take the vibrato eight days a week. The Deluxe Reverb is known for breaking up nicely at reasonable gig volumes, and while its overdriven sound goes farther than the 440, the overall touch sensitivity and sheer sweetness of the 440 gets the nod from me.

Model 450 Juno

On paper, the Magnatone 450 'Juno' is a real winner. With a pair of 6973s for power, it puts out about 18-20 watts and *should* howl like a tweed Deluxe in heat. But... the way the circuit is designed doesn't take full advantage of the potential in the power tubes, never quite pushing them into saturation, even when the amp is dimed. If there is a 'dog' in the bunch this amp is it. Nice clean sound with its 12 inch Oxford 12K5 and small oval midrange Oxford, nice reverb and vibrato, but very tame sounding. If you were choosing between a 450 and a Deluxe Reverb, you'd be smart to go Leo's route this time.

Model 460 Victory

The Magnatone 460 is flat out a great amp for many reasons. With a pair of 6L6GCs for power, it puts out a strong 35-40 watts through a pair of Oxford 12K5 speakers and a pair of Oxford midrange oval speakers. The 460's features and

<p>AMPLIFIER MODEL CUSTOM 460 \$499.95*</p> <p>REVERBERATION AT ITS BEST</p> <p>Deluxe professional hi-fi model featuring the ultimate in stereo vibrato and the revolutionary new Hammond Reverbation System which gives echo or "concert hall" acoustics to amplifier.</p>  <p>SPECIFICATIONS: 12 tubes, 1 transistor ■ 2 output channels strategy 50 watts ■ 2 extended range 12" hi-fi speakers ■ Two 6" oval midrange speakers ■ 2 input channels with individual address and tone controls ■ Each channel has 2 reverb jacks—one for high gain, one for low gain ■ Each channel has two compensated vibrato jacks for high and low gain ■ Stereo input jack between two channels ■ Vibrato system, Patent No. 2,992,224 ■ 2 vibrato controls—one for intensity, one for speed ■ Outside foot switch jack for remote control of vibrato ■ Hammond Reverbation System with variable control and foot switch jacks for use on AC line ■ Stereo speaker jack ■ Pilot light, 150V, high 250W long, Approx. Wt. 40 lbs.</p>	<p>\$399.95*</p> <p>REVERBERATION AT ITS BEST</p> <p>A dramatic new hi-fi professional model capable of faithful reproduction of full bass as well as treble tones. It is equipped with the amazing new Hammond Reverbation unit which gives echo or "concert hall" acoustics to amplifier.</p>  <p>SPECIFICATIONS: 12 tubes, 25 watt output ■ 2 extended range 12" hi-fi speakers ■ 2 oval midrange speakers with high frequency drivers ■ 2 input channels with individual address and tone controls ■ Each channel has 2 reverb jacks—one for high gain, one for low gain ■ Each channel has two compensated vibrato jacks for high and low gain ■ Stereo input jack between two channels ■ Vibrato system, Patent No. 2,992,224 ■ 2 vibrato controls—one for intensity, one for speed ■ Outside foot switch jack for remote control of vibrato ■ Hammond Reverbation System with variable control and foot switch jacks for use on AC line ■ Stereo speaker jack ■ Pilot light, 150V, high 250W long, Approx. Wt. 40 lbs.</p>
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power rating place it up against the Fender Vibrolux and Pro Reverb amps. I've already mentioned the difference in reverb and tremelo versus

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vibrato, and they apply here as well. The Pro Reverb is quite a bit louder than the 460, and the Vibrolux clearly breaks up more than the 460. The 460 gets creamy when pushed and does so at a volume that's perfect for small gigs, where the Fender might get your three set contract cut back to one. In a medium sized club setting the 460's clean-verging-on-overdriven sound really shines. For fans of Ronnie Earl's style, this amp is a perfect fit with more clean headroom than a Vibrolux and more sweetness than a Pro Reverb at giggable volume.

Model 480 Venus



The 480 is a totally original amp that is beyond comparison to anything available at the time or since. With a quad of 6973s, it has enough power for most live situations in small to medium sized clubs, and the potential of these great tubes is brought out nicely. The beefier

12L5 Alnico magnet Oxfords have a tighter bottom than the 12K5's. At low to moderate volume the 480 is beautifully rich in harmonics. Plug into channel two and flick the bright switch on for added bite and you can cut through any mix. Did I mention *stereo* vibrato? True, the novelty of it wears thin after a few hours, but wow! You'll find ways to use this effect on recordings, in your basement or in the club. How about placing two extension cabs at either side of the stage and watching the girl with the red sweater in the front row lose her equilibrium when you kick the vibrato in?!



Here are a few tricks to get the most out of your Magnatone "4" series amp: The Oxford 12K5 is a good speaker with fantastic swirly highs and upper midrange, but it lacks bass handling capability. I've

replaced the stock Oxford in my 440 with a Weber C12S and the highs are all there plus the speaker can handle the bottom much better. It's also a louder speaker than the Oxford.

The baffles in some Magnatone amps tend to rattle due to the way they're attached to the cabinet. Reinforcing the baffle with additional screws underneath the nameplate helps a lot, as does refitting and screwing the small wood blocks at the bottom rear of the baffle.

The 460's bass response and tightness improve dramatically

with the substitution of a solid state rectifier over the stock 5U4GB



Of course, if you don't intend to actually play the amp, but are merely "collecting," you can eschew the above recommendations. Please note: I am not placing Magnatone on

par with Fender amps in terms of road-worthiness. This is a comparison based on using Magnatone and Fender amps in studio. This information comes from years of owning and playing each of the amps listed and is intended as a guide for players, not a technical guide. Keep in mind that due to Estey's private labeling practices, you can find these same amplifiers, sometime with slight differences under names such as Unique, PANaramic, Titano, PAC-Amp, Da Vinci, Twilighter, Tonemaster and more. Many were made for house brand accordion lines and some feature aesthetic differences such as the 'Twilighter' black covering and silver grill in place of the standard Magnatone brown and gold. One could scour used accordion shops from Minneapolis to Milwaukee and find many of these gems collecting dust. This author may or may not have done so several dozen times...

Jeff Morris is singer/guitarist for Boston rock band Death & Taxes (www.myspace.com/deathntaxesband and www.deathntaxes.net) with past credits including western-surf rock band the Cadillac Hitmen, street rockers The Bruisers and acid-avant-garde band The Zuni Fetish Experiment, and has released 21 records in his career in music. Feel free to email jeffhitman@comcast.net with comments or questions.

Good Vibrations



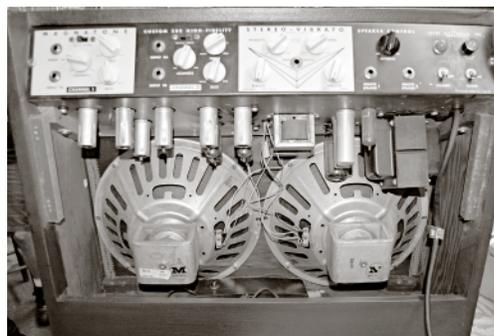
We scored our 1961-62 Magnatone 280-A on eBay from an older fellow named Vern in Redlands, CA. Vern told us

that he had known the original owner when he bought the amp new (along with a red Strat) and he had taken very good care of it. We're guessing Vern's buddy must have gone to glory at least 20 years ago, because our amp is as clean and original as it could possibly be, including all the original RCA and Amperex Bugle Boy tubes, vibrato footswitch and cover. Vern

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confessed to having neither the skill or a guitar to fully verify the 280's functional condition, but he did report that it seemed to work OK with a mic plugged into it... We paid \$950, outbidding six others, and when the amp arrived a week later we allowed it to warm up a bit with our Amp Preserver set at 115 volts, enjoying a good long sniff as four decades of California fruit-basket, red-dirt funk burned off from dusty Redlands. Strumming a Junior in both channels and vibrato modes, the 280 worked perfectly fine, thank you very much. The next day the Normal channel stopped working altogether (oxidation on the input jack, we guessed) and random crackling emerged, so it was off to Bakos Ampworks...

We shot pictures of the chassis on Jeff's bench while discussing a track that Sean Costello had cut in Jeff's studio with a 280 – "Love is Amazing," and a week later Jeff called as he was screwing the chassis back into the Magnatone's petrified pine cabinet. "I cleaned all the tube sockets, pots and input jacks, measured everything against the schematic and it's been sitting here idling for the past hour and a half. Dead quiet and it sounds great. Man, it's a rare, super clean classic – I wouldn't change a thing."



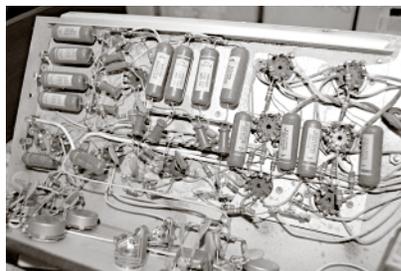
Hmmm. Let it be... We can't tell you how many times we've taken a leap of faith on a

40 year-old amp hundreds or thousands of miles away only to find that it needs nothing more than perhaps a few tubes or a different speaker. Yes, the accepted parts tolerances of plus or minus 10%-20% were a big swing, especially when you add 'drift' over decades, but after literally hundreds of such purchases on your behalf, we can confidently say that these classic amps remain not only fascinating pieces of America's industrial history, but also a living testament to a standard of enduring longevity that will never be seen again. And so it goes with the Magnatone 280. No, it isn't a gain monster you can hide behind, although fully dimed it gives up the goods with a little more punch from the Normal channel – but the real deal with the 280 was and is all about old school fidelity... rich, timbral



viscosity that allows every guitar you play through it to sound woody, deep, sonorous and steeped in the potent romance of wood,

nickel and steel. And yes, the pitch-shifting vibrato channel is creepy-good, both in the less intense 'mono' mode, and in stereo, where the speakers move out of phase to create a bizarre but very usable jitterbug warble and bleat. If you've a mind to, you can potently speak to folks through the Magnatone. Close your eyes and the guitar sounds as if it is being channeled through a diamond stylus on old vinyl, introducing a smoky and wisened legitimacy to your tone and voice – a sound to be remembered and revered for the way it floats in the mind long after the last note has faded.



The 280's innards closely track the accepted state-of-the-art in the early '60s reflected by Fender, with Schumacher transformers and dozens of the

same blue molded caps used in the blackace amps (earlier 280s reveal a mix of late '50s bright yellow Astrons found in Fender tweeds). The chassis appears to be some type of dull, worked steel resembling aluminum, with multiple tag boards riveted directly to the chassis floor. And what about the dual tweeters? They are almost always blown. One of ours was still working, but after asking Neil Young's tech and TQ advisory board member Larry Craig what had been done to Neil's 280 (the tweeters were disconnected), we did the same. *Nice legs, shame about her face.* The stout, top-of-the-line Oxford Alnico 12s are solid and lush, with not a hint of voice coil rub, fatigue or cone rot. We may try other speakers down the road (you never know until you know), but for now we'll leave the Oxfords in and savor the mojo. Tubes: Two Amperex 12AX7s, RCA 6CG7s for the vibrato circuit and a 12BH7 for the oscillator amp. Phase inversion is split between a 12AX7 and 6CG7, with four RCA 6973 power tubes sporting red 'Estey' stencils on the glass.

1959 Magnatone 190 Professional



Right on the heels of our 280-A score, our pal Greg Talley sniped an exceptionally rare '59 190 1x12 on eBay for three hundred and change while the other bidders wasted their time low-balling it. Google the 190

and you'll find nothing but a perfunctory chronological listing minus pictures, and no schematic on SchematicHeaven.com. Like we said – rare and obscure, and the 190 Professional is a

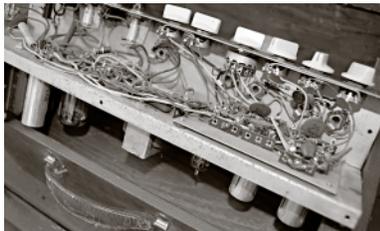
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fascinating amp. Greg's little beater features the original dual 12AX7 Amperex Bugle Boys, RCA 6CG7, dual Mullard EL34s (one broken in shipment), a Mullard GZ34, Oxford Alnico 12, and the requisite pee stain from a mutant Jack Russell/Pug spritzing down the right side of the grill cloth. Classic.



Channel One features Volume, Bass and Treble controls, a rotary 'Contour' switch with Mellow, Flat, Bright and Treble+ settings, and high and low level inputs.

Channel Two is limited to Volume and Tone, separate high and low level inputs, with additional back panel features that include a stand-by switch, phase/hum switch (ground) and extension speaker jack. The 190 is no gain monster like some of the Gibson amps being built in '59, but wide open, it will slide into the grease zone with a push. Below that, the tone is kinda clean (with lint) and older than your mom's silverware. Like the 280, the 190 just oozes late '50s funk-o-ponic, hi-fi vinyl tone, as if the



sound of your guitar were being mastered on acetate by a mousy little fellow with horn-rimmed glasses and a short-sleeved dress shirt working inside the

cabinet. Bizarre but true. We wouldn't describe the 190 as an every day performance amp – like many Magnatones, it is curiously under-powered given its two EL34s, but it does have a head-turning tone that sharp guitarists will find useful on recordings, no doubt. You can think of both Magnatones reviewed here as far closer in sound to the guitars heard on the original blues recordings by Otis Rush, Freddie King, Buddy Guy and Hubert Sumlin with The Wolf... Remember – intense distortion in 'the blues' didn't really appear until much later.



As Leo Fender and Don Randall at Fender Sales continued to dominate the guitar amp market in the mid '60s, Estey introduced the 'Custom M' Series (1964-66) – now commonly referred to as the 'suitcase' amps, including the M2, M4, M6, M7, M9, M10, M12

bass, M15-A, M15Pro, M15 Dual Imperial and M20 Stereo. Also introduced in 1964 was the über quirky Starlite Series. In 1967, Estey, now a division of the Electro-Learner Corporation in Harmony, PA, hurtled into the future with a new line of bizarre transistor amps, and the company eventually faded into history by 1971. For detailed information on the history of Magnatone amps, model archives, technical details and pictures, you can't do better than www.vibroworld.com. Quest forth... **To**

ToneQuest Neil's Rig



One of our favorite 'later' albums from Neil Young's mind-altering body of work is *Ragged Glory*, featuring an unapologetic Crazy Horse anthem to the imperfect human condition... "Why Do I Keep Fucking Up?" If Neil is indeed the 'godfather of grunge' as some in the music press have sug-

gested, this song puts a fine point on it with plaintive directness, further elevated by Young's otherworldly knack for spinning a winsome tune anchored by a growling, howling, screaming Old Black. The 10-minute long "Love to Burn" that follows is equally incendiary, leaving Old Black in a smoldering heap, wantonly trampled by The Horse. Good stuff – the kind of classic, cage match rock jams that'll do ya good after a steep miscue with the wife. Those of you who are too evolved to slip into an occasional domestic verbal dust up, just grab a D18, slide into a pair of corduroy slippers and take a run at "Sugar Mountain." You may have to drop the key to hit the high notes, and if you wind up sounding like *Faron Young*, we forgive ya. Neil's got sumthin' for everybody.

When we asked Young's trusty sound and guitar man Larry Craigg which amps were used when *Ragged Glory* was cut live in the barn with Crazy Horse, Larry replied, "It's the tweed Deluxe, the Magnatone 280 and the Baldwin Exterminator." Well, exactly three years after that interview was published (September 2006), we have yet to catch a whiff of a Baldwin Exterminator, but we acquired another one of Young's go-to amps – our '58 tweed Tremolux, plus the Magnatone 280, and now Lou Rosano has just sent us his take on a bigger, badder 5E3 tweed Deluxe designed and built to run on 6L6s in much the same way Neil's Deluxe is

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biased for them. All we can say is, *you really, really need you one of these. Really.* **TQ**

The Buster



We're introducing you to two stellar amps built by Lou Rosano in this issue – both outstanding choices for different reasons, depending on whatcha need... or *want* (two entirely different criteria).

'Buster' is all the name implies – Rosano's unique take on a muscled-up tweed 5E3 Deluxe that, as Lou put it, "You can throw in the back seat, play at a gig in a decent sized room and hang with the band – something you can't really do with a stock 5E3." And how do you do that? Beef up the power section to a full 25 watts with much bigger transformers designed for dual 6L6s and a 5AR4 rectifier rather than the Deluxe's 6V6s and 5Y3, voice it with a normal and bright channel that can be jumped and mixed with a 'Y' cord, and design the circuit to respond dynamically with a guitar, enabling you to deftly roam between cleaner tones at stage volume and sweet over-driven distortion and sustain, all from the volume pot on yer axe. Add exceptional tubes, a rock solid pine box, and for just \$1,599 you've got a bread & butter rig that absolutely eclipses every 5E3 knock-off we've ever played. Now, before you consider calling to ask if it's really that good... yes, it's really that good. Best of all, there is no better or more transparent platform than the Buster for further honing your tone with optional speakers and tubes... Our review model was loaded with a Celestion 25 watt Greenback, matched Ruby 6L6s, Sovtek 5AR4 and a RAM 12AX7 in the bright channel. What's a RAM tube? Custom selected and matched tubes from a fellow by the name of Roger Modjeski in Santa Barbara. For the full scoop on what Mr. Modjeski is all about, log on to www.ram-labs-musicreference.com, and for his tube store, see www.tubeaudiostore.com.

We couldn't resist loading the Buster with an assortment of tubes and speakers – the bias pot allows versatile tube replacements, and we tried NOS GE 5881s, Philips 6L6WGBs, and a used-but-good pair of RCA blackplate 6L6s. The result? How much cream do you want in your coffee? They're all good – just different, with the 5881s being a little edgier and mean on the top, while the RCAs are clotted cream. We actually preferred the brilliant yet warm and musical sound of the Ruby 6L6GCMSTRs – highly recommended, and the Buster



bloomed and boomed even more with a pair of silky, old-but-good RCA 12AX7s. The Greenback is what it is – a little middy with a snappy, detailed top end and solid if

not lush bass response. We tried one of our reconed '60s vintage silver Celestion Alnico G12s, a reconed '66 Jensen C12N, Eminence Red Fang and Warehouse Speakers' version of a Vintage 30 – the Veteran 60. As we expected, the silver Celestion Alnico and Red Fang seemed too thin as a single in this amp, the Jensen was the loudest of all with brilliant treble



and upper mids, but tilted a tad too far in the high frequencies, and the Veteran 60 was rich, detailed and beefy with slightly rolled-off highs on the very top. We were truly torn between the Veteran and the Greenback (they'd make a

stunning couple paired in the same box...) A very pleasant toss up, and we'll happily ramble on with the Veteran 60 for now since we're on another single P90 Les Paul Junior binge.

Louis Electric

KR 12



If the Buster is Lou Rosano's answer to the club player's dream, the dual EL34 KR12 head & cab bring another twenty watts to the party with master volume, four footswitchable gain stages, and a nifty negative feedback adjustment. The first 1x12 version of the KR12 was

built for Keith Richards, and Rosano has tweaked up the head version as follows:

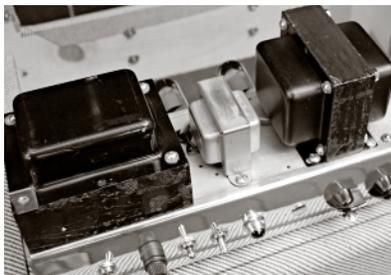
TQR: How would you describe this amp, Lou?

It's the KR12 amp that was originally designed for Keith Richards, but in a head and 2x12 cab. The combo has gone through some changes since then, and when Robben Ford began using it, I had made some slight changes for the head.

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It also has a feedback loop dampening control. Instead of using a fixed resistor value for the negative feedback, it has an adjustable range from 27K to 250K. Some players like the sound looser, others don't, so this allows you to change the dynamic character of the amp.

TQR: Are you still having your transformers custom wound?



Yes, by Chris Merren of Merren Audio, and the transformers for this amp are custom-built for this design. Everything we do with transformers are unique to my amps.

TQR: For the sake of comparison, it's always helpful to understand which if any familiar models from the past may be similar to this version of the KR12 head... Was it inspired by any other amp we may know?

Yeah, the tweed Twin. The transformers are different and there are some differences in the circuit, but still, it's similar to the narrow panel, low-power tweed Twins I've built in the past, starting with Danny Gatton.

TQR: Robben Ford is using a 100 watt version, correct?



He started out playing the same 45 watt amp I sent you while I was working on his Dumble. He was touring this past summer with Jorma Kaukonen, who really liked the KR12, and

when Robben got the Dumble back, I told Jorma to go ahead and use it for the rest of the tour. Robben now has a 100 watt version of the KR12 and Jorma just bought the 45 watt.

TQR: You shipped our review amp with EL34s, but can you also run it with 6L6s?

Sure. What I've noticed is that you get more gain with EL34s and the tone has more midrange. With 6L6s it has more bloom. I can also build it with a tube or diode rectifier, and you can order a 2x12 or 1x12 cabinet. I originally used G12H30 70th Anniversaries, which sound great, but I've also recently loaded a cabinet with Vintage 30s and I liked that

sound, too. Basically, you can have whatever you want. [To](http://www.louisamps.com)

www.louisamps.com, 201-384-6166

KR12 Review



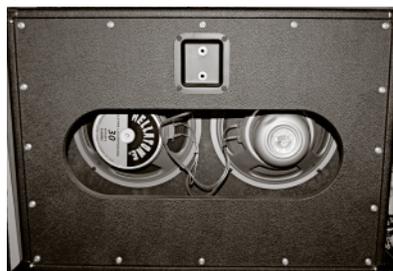
What you're getting with the KR12 head is a more powerful and versatile platform that delivers variable levels of selectable gain from a single footswitch

plugged into the gain or normal inputs, additional control over dynamics and touch-sensitivity via the feedback control, and a well-designed master volume circuit that manages decibel levels without ramming the signal into a progressively narrow and compressed voice. The KR12 does indeed possess the room-filling,



proud voice of a low-power tweed Twin, but endowed with far more versatile tone and gain shaping features. We played the KR12 for hours with nothing more than Lee Jackson's brilliant Mr. Springgy reverb pedal adding a bit of space, and the sound with all of our guitars was gloriously, extraordinarily rich and lush – less scooped in the mids than a typical big Fender, yet lacking nothing throughout the entire frequency range of the guitar. Fans of both Marshall and Fender amps will be equally thrilled with the KR12 and its ability to deftly roam from big, clean tones at moderate volume levels, to subtle-to-intense, thick sustain throttled down with the master volume or wide open at 45 watts. This amp impresses us as a cleverly designed hybrid covering the best attributes of British and American classics, pure and simple.

The 2x12 cabinet loaded with Celestion Alnico Gold speakers is an inherently bright and bold rig that sounded best with humbucking pickups or a little treble rolled off on single coils. We also ran the KR12 with our own Avatar 2x12 'football' back cabinet loaded with a G12H 30 70th Anniversary Hellatone and vintage Celestion silver Alnico G12 – hard to beat, and the kind of exceptional sound that immediately com-



pels listeners to look in the back of the cabinet to see what's inside. Happens every time.

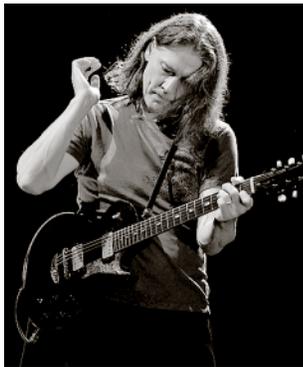
It's also interesting to note that after

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sending his Dumble Overdrive Special to Lou Rosano for some TLC and using a KR12, Robben Ford is now enjoying a 100 watt model while Jorma Kaukonen has embraced the 45 watt KR12 reviewed here. Well, in response to many requests over the years, this seems like a fine time to offer up a very special lagniappe – Part 1 of our ninety minute interview with one of the most accomplished and admired guitarists of our time, Robben Ford. For those of you thirsting for the source of Robben’s magical touch and tone (is it in his hands... the gear... a combination of both?) we offer the following quote from Robben: *“I always knew if I wanted to do something, I could do it.”* Attitude before altitude, people. *Enjoy...*

Part One

Robben Ford



TQR: How were you initially exposed to music, Robben?

I was so open to music that it seemed I liked almost everything. My parents bought a record player, joined a record club, and received a stack of records that I remember included Ravel’s Bolero and some kind of big band percussion record, among other

things. My father also played a lot of Hank Williams stuff on the guitar and sang... he had good time and a very good voice. The radio in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s was also very eclectic, and whatever was on the radio I would listen to – from “Walk in the Black Forest” to the Beatles. Everyone in my family was like that – there was a lot of love for music and a lot of support and encouragement for playing music in my family.

TQR: How did you become interested in the saxophone?

That was one of the few epiphanies I had when I was about nine years old. My older brother Patrick played drums in the junior high school band, we went to a performance where a



Paul Desmond

guy that played alto saxophone was featured as a soloist, and that’s when I had this complete spiritual experience. I got an alto sax and that was the first instrument I was really serious about. Surf music was very popular at that time and there was a lot of tenor sax in that music, but the first

truly great sax player I heard was Paul Desmond, who was on Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five.” I consider him one of my main musical influences to this day, although you might not know it by hearing me play the guitar. The guitar really came into play after I heard Mike Bloomfield, which would have been in 1965 or ‘66 on the first Paul Butterfield Blues Band album. But the first time I actually got to see Michael Bloomfield was with the Electric Flag... I saw the Electric Flag and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band both on the same night at the Fillmore. The opening band was the James Cotton f’ing Blues Band, and those were my three favorite bands, all on the same night! I’d been playing guitar at that time for about a year and a half... I’d joined my older brother’s band and we had horns, because we wanted to be like the Electric Flag. Initially, when I first started, my father showed me a few chords, and a friend of mine eventually showed me how to play a 9 chord, which was very exciting, since those were being played all over that Bloomfield record. Beyond that, I was listening to records and learning Mike Bloomfield licks from the records, just banging on the guitar.

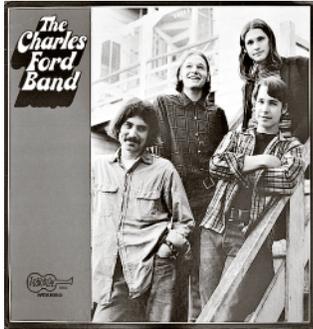
TQR: Do you recall when you felt as if you could finally play what you were hearing in your head – when you felt like “I got it?”

I think I was relatively impressed with myself after a couple of years on the guitar, but that was just based on a certain amount of ability and a natural inclination toward the guitar... and being hormonal (laughing). I eventually went from there, to depression and a hatred of my own playing, because what I was trying to get to I couldn’t get to. With the blues, I kind of learned it pretty quickly, but my interest was drawn more and more into jazz, and I couldn’t figure it out – it was over my head. I started playing jazz tunes – not things like “Stella By Starlight”... more like things on Blue Note records – Wayne Shorter and Joe Henderson tunes. But for some reason jazz guitar never really appealed to me that much. I had listened to Kenny Burrell, whom I liked, and Jim Hall, who I loved, but I wasn’t buying those records. I liked tenor saxophone players and blues guitar players, and I was trying to fuse these two things together.

TQR: Based on your fluid playing style, it seems to have worked. Once you got past the crawling stage with the guitar, before jazz imposed a brick wall, what did your gear scene look like?

I don’t think I even owned an amp in the first group I played in at 13. We had two guitars, bass and drums, I played the guitar with another guy, played saxophone and sang, and the other guitar player’s parents were kinda wealthy, and I think I plugged into his amp. I had a very cheap Orpheus electric that I had gotten for Christmas, so we’d all plug into one amp, and then I moved to bass for a while. Back to the other guitar player... one day his mom bought a Fender piggyback

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Bassman and a piggyback Bandmaster, so suddenly I was playing through the Bassman and I picked pears one summer and bought a Vox violin bass. I had the hippest gear in the world! None of the older bands had any of that stuff and they were so jealous. That Bassman amp stayed with

me, and I eventually bought a cherry red Guild Starfire II or IV, I can't remember which – the one with the trapeze tail-piece. That remained my main *OK, I'm playing the blues through an electric guitar* rig throughout high school all the way until the time I joined the Jimmy Witherspoon Band.

TQR: And then?

After I graduated from high school, my older brother Patrick and I started the Charles Ford Band, and during that time Charlie Musselwhite picked up my brother on drums. Patrick joined Charlie's band and went on the road for like three months, which was a very hard time for the rest of us, playing with different people and really not knowing what to do... Then Patrick told Charlie, "Look, man, I love you, but I have to go back and play with my brother." And Charlie said, "Well, I guess I'll have him join the band, too." He hired me so he wouldn't lose my brother (laughing). That's how I got my first gig. I played my first couple of shows with Charlie and he didn't pay me. He was about to go on vacation and he said, "I was just checking you out to see if it would work." After that I traded my Starfire for a Gibson L5, and I played that with Jimmy Witherspoon.

TQR: Junior Watson told a story about you and your brother showing up at a jam in a house his band rehearsed in, and how good you both were at that time. He seemed truly humbled. He also said you showed up with a Super 400.

Well, we were all a part of the South Bay, San Jose area... I moved to a Super 400 with Witherspoon, but back then I'm



sure I was playing the L5. I always wanted an ES175 but never got one... I bought the L5 just because it was a big-bodied jazz guitar – it almost could have been anything, but that's what was on the wall at Sherman & Clay in San Francisco, and it



was really expensive... \$1200, which was a lot back then. It actually was not that good of a guitar, and somehow or other I figured out that I wanted something different. I went to a store on Sunset in L.A. and found the Super 400, liked it, and I think I traded the L5 and \$200 for it.

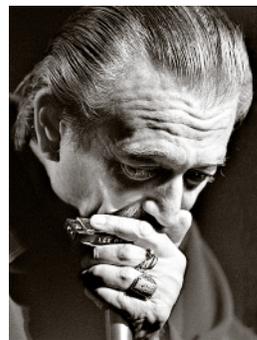
TQR: You didn't have any trouble with feedback?

You know, I think I did with the L5, but with the Super 400 I moved over to a blackface Super Reverb, and I don't remember having any problems.

TQR: And you weren't using any effects...

Yeah, and I had been playing through that Bassman with no reverb... Wow, I could never do that today. Back then I didn't think about these things very much. You needed sustain, and generally reverb helps with that, but again, I didn't think about it.

TQR: How long were you with Charlie Musselwhite? You must have learned a lot.



About nine months, and it was a pretty hard life at that time. It wasn't a great time for Charlie personally, and I was very untraveled... very unhip to the world. My brother and I had moved to this town that was away from everything, and I spent most of my time alone never seeing my friends. And playing with Charlie was not necessarily *fun*. It wasn't

a happy bunch. Charlie is a beautiful guy, man... He's a very cool person... It was just not a great time for him, and my brother and I were not around our friends or people we knew very much. Now, with Spoon, that's where I got a transmission from somebody – something beyond my own personal growth.

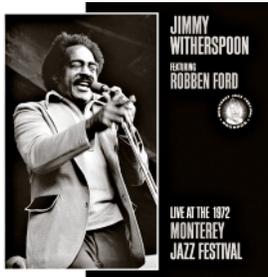
TQR: I think you also once said that playing with Joni Mitchell was one of the most formative times in your life as a musician.

It was *the* most formative, because it was the first time I was ever around realized musicians. Even with Spoon, it was my own little band... my peers... my buddies – twenty year old hippy kids just trying to get by and pay the rent. It was all about survival. I spent two years with Spoon, and there is a

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lot of stuff I see in myself that came directly from Jimmy Witherspoon. Just the way I count off a song came from him... the way I feel swing and tempos. Spoon had a lot to do with that.

TQR: Would it be fair to say that experience enabled you to *ride* with the music rather than standing up there thinking too much about what you were doing?



Well, when you get that sense of swing... that sense of pulse, it makes a huge difference in everything else. I didn't even know it was going on at the time – I only knew this in retrospect. I mean, I figured it out a long time ago, but not while I was with him necessarily. It was like

he stuck a needle in my arm and injected this *swing juice* (laughing). He could swing a whole band, you know... I'd never stood next to or played with anyone who could swing like that.

TQR: Doesn't that require you to lose a part of yourself – to become unconscious in a way?

I would say that it is a huge *relief*. Like when you said, "Lose something," I was thinking that you almost lose your ego. I don't know if everyone would say the same thing, but it's like



you're there for *them*, now. When I played with Spoon I was playing for him. He was throwing me energy, and he

was really proud of what I was doing... just feeding me energy. It was something I didn't realize at the time, but I look back on it now and I can see it very clearly.

TQR: And so the Joni Mitchell experience could be described as a different situation where you were surrounded by the top of the heap among L.A. musicians...as you put it, people who were *realized*.

Yeah, very sophisticated musicians who were all very comfortable in their own skin. They were *the* first-call musicians in Los Angeles and they had all played with the greatest players in rock, jazz... you name it. Finally, when it was time for me to leave Spoon's band, I went down to L.A. to tell Spoon I was leaving. While I was at the office, someone said there was a call for me and it was Tom Scott, who I knew nothing



about, and he asked me if I would be interested in going on the road with him and Joni Mitchell. I was like, "Well, I don't think so..." I knew nothing about them or Joni Mitchell – I mean, I knew her name, but I was really not familiar with her music – I had heard a little of it.

Tom suggested that he bring over the acetate of *Court and Spark* and see if I liked it, so he brought it to the office along with the L.A. Express' first album, and I remember really liking the drummer. That's all that struck me – that I really liked the drummer. So Tom said, "Why don't you come over to A&M tomorrow and just jam with the band and see if you like it?" So I went, and Larry Carlton was there because he had played on the first L.A. Express record, and he was going



to show me the parts to play. I didn't even know who Larry was at the time – you know... "Put It Where You Want It..." I had heard that song on the radio and hated it (laughing), but I was a blues snob back then. So Larry showed me some of the parts and I honestly didn't like the music. Then at some point Joni came in and whoah! She

was looking *good* (laughing)... The pianist was Roger Kellaway, who became a dear friend and a major mentor, and I was very impressed with him. So I jammed with them for awhile and I was thinking, "Man, do I want to do this?" I decided to do it because it was an opportunity to be around great musicians. They were all really nice and really supportive – genuine, you know? So even though I was on the fence about it, I had to do it.

TQR: But the music wasn't exactly giving you cold chills...

Not at all. I did not care for the L.A. Express' music. I thought it was watered-down jazz and I wanted to be playing



John Coltrane. Joni's music on the other hand was very sophisticated, and they had to baby-step me through the whole thing. I can't believe they put up with me, man... I knew how to read rhythms and I knew what a chord was, but I didn't know how to read charts and Joni's music was chords on top of chords – very complex. I don't even know how I learned the music, because it was so different.

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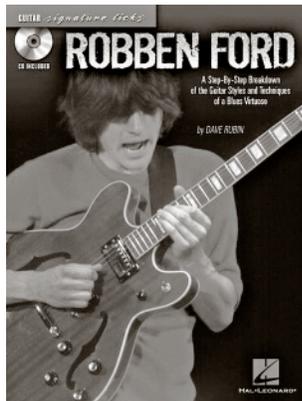


Roger Kellaway

We rehearsed for two weeks... I snorted my first cocaine... (laughing). And we went on the road. I was living at Tom Scott's house when we were home, and I was hanging with Roger Kellaway on the road as much as I could. Joni would have a piano brought to her room in every hotel, you know... it was part of her deal. We'd hang out and I learned so much from these

people. I learned how to appreciate a major triad – it no longer had to be a 13 flat 9, you know, to be hip and cool. So I started learning how to play with other people and accompany someone. I'd say it took me ten years to finally learn how to do that. Prior to that they *showed* me what to play, and it didn't come naturally to me at all. But after a long time I finally got to the point where I felt that I could fit into any musical situation.

TQR: Did that transition also prompt you to change your rig?



Yeah, I had to, because at the time I was still playing the Super 400 through the Super Reverb. I started using pedals, and that rig just wasn't going to work, so Tom took me down to Guitar Center and bought me what Larry Carlton had been using – an MXR phase shifter and fuz-tone, a wah-wah pedal and a volume pedal. With the Super 400 I'd hit the fuzz

and the guitar would just freak out. So again, Tom took me down to Guitar Center and I bought a '61 cherry red 335, and I bought a Twin Reverb – not because I thought it was a good amp or I knew shit about it... It was more like, "OK, I guess I'll get one of these."

TQR: And you did this all during the same two-week time period when you were learning the songs?

Yes, and it was intense – really starting from scratch and it was hard.

TQR: Were you hitting the pillow every night thinking...

I suck? No. I had a very strong sense of my musicality early on.

TQR: You didn't really fear it at all, did you?

No. Believe me, I experienced a lot of fear from the point of view that I'm in a situation that is way over my head, but fundamentally, I always knew if I wanted to do something, I could do it. I don't know how they put up with me, but they helped me realize my potential, or at least some of it.

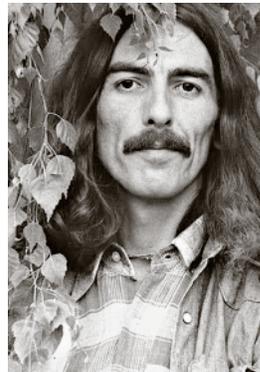
TQR: Do you think that could happen today?

Sure. But today, I don't see that level of talent. I don't see a lot of people that can play the shit out of their instruments. Maybe the studio scene allowed a lot of that to evolve, because basically they were all jazz players that *became* studio musicians.

TQR: But you changed your rig up and made it work...

Yes, and the resulting record was *Miles of Aisles*. I bought the CD maybe five years ago and I was just so proud of it.

TQR: Let's talk about George Harrison... You played on the Dark Horse tour.



It was the only tour he ever did, and I met George on the road with Joni. We played in London two nights, and Tom Scott was friends with George and Ravi Shankar, because he had done a record which was Ravi kind of trying to make a pop record, and Tom was familiar with Indian music. I didn't know that George was coming to the show in London, and I was standing back

stage in the dressing room area, turned around and George Harrison is standing there smiling at me. He was straight from *All Things Must Pass* with the hair down to his waist, the mustache, plaid coat and boots... And he says, "Hi Robben." What do you say? He was very energetic and talkative – very high energy. You didn't have a conversation with George – he spoke to you. We went back to the hotel after the



show and I remember sitting on the floor and George in a chair as he told me the story of his red Les Paul getting stolen for 40 minutes (laughing). The next day we all went out to his place at Henley-on-Thames – Friar Park, a huge, castle-like place – the same place from *All Things Must Pass* with those rolling grounds. We all got out there at about one in the afternoon, and George didn't get out of bed

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until around four, so we just hung out for three and half hours with his man Friday, Kumar, this Indian guy, who showed us all around the grounds until George appeared, all smiles with a Galois in his hand, man. Smoked *all* the time... Patti was there and made tea for everybody and we hung out, we drank and smoked, and eventually around midnight we went up to the third or fourth floor where he had his studio and about fifty beautiful vintage guitars all over the place... and cocaine



in boxes all around the room. We snorted coke and recorded two songs for the Dark Horse album – “Hari’s On Tour (Express)” and

“Simply Shady.” We recorded until the sun came up and then everybody went to bed, and I think we left the next day (laughing), but I’m really not sure. And then I was invited to play on the Dark Horse tour.

TQR: And what were your deepest, most lasting impressions of that experience?

Well, you know, it was my first experience with the *serious* rock & roll world... David Bowie, John Lennon, Ringo, Steve Cropper... these people would just show up. Peter Sellers was on the plane with us for a couple of days... Bob Dylan came out... it was just amazing that way. But it was a double-edged thing because George was really not comfortable in the role of fronting a band – it was not what he was built to do, and he never did it again. He was a really fun person, and a really caring guy, and he had also just met Olivia and he was in the budding stages of that romance that led to marriage, so he was all about that. We were left to our own devices – it wasn’t like we were being led, so it was a little weird. The tour had a slightly groundless quality to it and we were playing two shows a day sometimes, and each show was like three hours long. We’d be in these huge 20,000 seat auditoriums, arrive for sound check and be there for 15 hours. It was a lot of hard work.

TQR: And pardon me for not knowing, but what kind of rig did you use on that tour?

I bought another Guild Starfire and the same Twin Reverb, (with Altec Lansings in it...), and I used my same little pedal setup.

TQR: Did you enjoy playing the music on that tour?

Ah, it was a little boring musically. It was all major triads, so there was very little room for improvisation. George and I did

jam on “My Guitar Gently Weeps” and that had its moments... We did one blues and everyone got a chorus.

Next month: Part 2 – The Inside Story (the Yellowjackets), Chasing John Coltrane, Rediscovering the Blues, Miles Davis, The Blue Line, The Dumble, The Guitars, On Recording, the DVD Instructional Series and more. **To**

www.robbenford.com

Evidence Audio

Forte Cable

In case you haven’t noticed, we’re awash in booteek guitar, patch, and speaker cables these days. So, when cable brewer Tony Farinella of Evidence Audio informed us that he was now making a more flexible and stage-friendly version of his cable, we were appropriately intrigued. The following interview says it all...

TQR: A lot of heavy, ‘solid,’ non-stranded cables have appeared in the past 5-7 years, and of course, some people just don’t like dealing with the extra stiffness that comes with them... How long have you been working on the slinkier Forte cable, what was involved in developing it, and how have you managed to retain the immediacy, presence and clarity of your heavier cable with this more flexible formula?



I’ve been working on it for about six months. The development process was

essentially executing “prior knowledge” about materials and design – stuff that had been percolating in the back of my mind for years, perhaps. What I have to do is build cables that get out of the way of the music, and for years I’ve done that building cables that are comparatively rigid. The Melody solved some of that as a side-effect to being more affordable, but for the first cable coming out of the guitar, I wanted to put a better foot forward where budget allows. The Lyric HG is the best way to take the “cable sound” out of a signal path, but I realized it wasn’t for everyone to use live and jump around on stage with. So, enter the Forte. It is built on my priority system for a particular sound (or lack thereof), with a focused application of being the first cable coming out of the guitar for live use, without much sacrifice of any particular quality. The Monorail has its specific application, the Lyric HG and Melody retain theirs, and the Forte fills a gap that

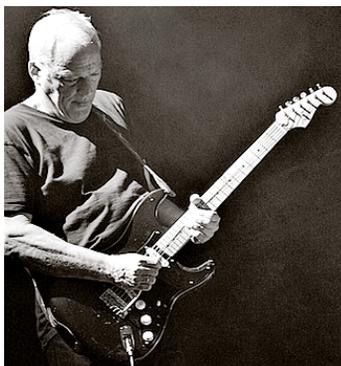
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became apparent after watching one too many loyal Evidence Audio customers walk on stage with something generic coming out of the guitar. I know what they are using at home and in sessions, and it was killing me to see a few of these guys leave their tone behind when they hit the road. How did I manage this? One of the largest drawbacks for sound quality in cables are the electro-magnetic problems introduced by strand interaction. The ideal solution is to use solid-core conductors which are electrically isolated from each other. The greater the isolation, the better the sound, and the stiffer the cable. What I'm doing in the Forte is in essence using a stranded conductor instead of a solid-core conductor, however



each strand is coated with very thin material that electrically isolates it from the other strands. The Proximity-Effect is nearly eliminated and

the cable feels normal when you toss it around. It just doesn't sound like a normal cable. There are a few other tricks I've been able to implement which will give it some advantages over any other cable I have made. Couple that with the fact I may actually be growing less uptight as I get older. My head has been locked in a vice about how certain music products such as cables must be held to the highest standard of doing nothing to the signal. If a cable adds the slightest bit of mojo it's failing, because mojo-in must always equal mojo-out. But I'm relaxing a bit and starting to accept the idea of, "Hey, it may do a little sumpthin' sumpthin,' but if it does something someone likes... I need to take a pill and let them enjoy it." Especially if it allows anyone to jump around on stage with



it, ignore it and get lost in the music. And that's the entire point. I don't want anyone *thinking* about my cable. It needs to disappear sonically, and now I'm doing my best to have it disappear *physically*. The number of neurons we have to fire off at any moment will vary, but when we

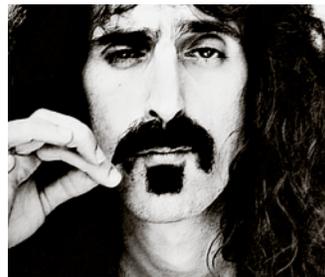
are in the process of making music, a single neuron firing in the name of the gear instead of the music is one neuron too many.

TQR: Do cables have an audible break-in period similar to speakers?

With typical use (where use = signal passing through the cable) I find no reliably discernable difference between a cable that has 40 hours of signal through it versus a cable that has 41 hours or 401 hours through it. Just to give some con-

text and set a stage for anyone else to play around with this themselves, take five new and identical cables. Get signal through one for 10 hours, signal through a second for 20 hours, signal through a third for 30 hours, signal through a fourth for 40 hours. Now just do some listening between a virgin cable and the one with 10 hours on it. And 20, and 30 and so on. Compare the one with 30 hours on it versus the one with 40 hours on it. Going through this process, I find the largest magnitude of change takes place early on. While totally unquantifiable, I reckon 80% of the change takes place in the first 10 hours, I hear very little difference between the cables with 30 and 40 hours on them. The change diminishes with time and seems to stop after 40 hours. On a cable left idle for weeks or months it can help to repeat the process.

What is this change people describe? I keep going back to the same description time and again – "Less push in the midrange." Consider it this way... less congestion. Not as *forced*. With a new cable, the midrange almost seems to be trying too hard. But once broken-in, the midrange is more open, flows better and is in better balance with the bottom and top. It's not so much a tonal thing – it can dance around feelings of compression and a touch of phase, sonically akin to a driver breaking in. But a speaker driver breaking in is more of a physical process than an electrical one, as with an amp or pedal. The spider's movement properties change a bit as it gets some time on it. Temperature and humidity changes do a lot as well. It might be better to describe what happens with a cable or an amp as "burn-in" instead of "break-in." In cables, the insulation material changes on a molecular level as a charge is placed on



the conductor – just as with the capacitors in an amplifier. Various dielectrics behave differently, but the longer and more consistently a charge is placed on the insulation material, the overall performance seems (slightly) improved in the manner described above.

TQR: You've addressed this to some extent before, but from the perspective of a typical guitarist who doesn't have access to all the new cables being humped today, the problem remains one of perception, reality, and hype. No one can try everything, but we are continually hearing about the latest 'must have' cable... *Solid Cable, Lava, Excetylene, Canare, Mogami, Jena Labs, Steve Vai (DiMarzio), Elixir, Alleva-Coppolo Artist, Zaolla, Klotz, George L, ProCo, Whirlwind, Planet Waves...* (and what about Stevie Ray Vaughan's favorite – Radio Shack?) Even if we wanted to review them all in some kind of grotesque and useless 'shootout' (and

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we don't), it seems that the cable biz has morphed into an impotent version of the Wine Spectator, some cables exhibiting a hint of white chocolate and walnut in the mids, while others reveal a minerally, citrus character of agave and hops in the top end with lows anchored by a nascent blend of molasses and mudhoney... And this dramatic, exponential exploitation of the 15 foot guitar cord is

absolutely useless in the context of pursuing the creation of good music that anyone would care to hear more than once. We use your cable, and have for years, along with others... The sound of the guitar and amp just seem more 'there' with your cable, as if a veil were lifted. But please – no agave, walnuts or mudhoney... Could you please spare our readers and the world of such paralysis by analysis and simply tell us what they might hear (or not) in your new Forte cables compared to whatever stuff our readers may be using now (let's assume some kind of stranded guitar cord, since if I have already bought a \$150 10 footer from some other outfit, you'll have to pry it from my cold, dead hands before I'll admit that it sounds anything less than life-changing).



Wow, it must be Freaky Friday. Normally I offer up 300-word answers to your 3-word questions. Here you ask me a 300-word question with the answer being three words you already provided – “just more ‘there.’” So you’ve answered it, but I’ll just add that the ‘more’ = *you*. What more do you need? Walnuts and agave? Once you have walnuts and agave then what? Roasted walnuts? Blue agave? Then what?

Candied roasted walnuts? Candied, *fire-roasted* Argentine walnuts dipped in blue agave? How the hell do you top *that*? Easy. Sadly. Welcome to the Hype Machine. **To**

www.evidenceaudio.com

Riverhorse spans the holy grail

The Big Scream

Recessed ever so deep in the cheeky annals of tone lore, few pedals are as sought after as vintage TS-808 Tube Screemers.



Yes, we've heard a few, played a few, and they never really did much for us, yet rabid kool-aid drinkers, collectors, and lusty wankers are still dropping hundreds of bucks for them, long after the green rush began. Seems like as good a time as any to revisit The Big Scream, so

on our umpteenth stop at Bart Wittrock's Rockin' Robin Houston guitar shop to plan a morning surf, we asked the man himself to poke around in back for a few ripe ones. It took all of a minute for him to unearth four real-deal originals as Bart sagely remarked, "Just turn up the damn amp – why the hell would anyone want one of these?" One of the major memories from playing the half-dozen or so 1959 Les Pauls for the April '08 Spanish Castle issue of TQR was that everything must always be played side-by-side to have a true reference point. Tube Screemers are hard to find, so our quad would be a good foray, no doubt. We even had a vintage Maxon from Japan among them as well. No, we are not claiming to know every detail about these pedals historically,



or wishing to debate Malaysian chips versus those from Chiliwong or wherever – we're merely firing up a few from the time period widely accepted as 'the golden era' of

Tube Screamerville to see what happens when hype meets good old-fashioned, honest scrutiny.

The majority of known players we've seen who enjoy frolicking with Tube Screemers unfortunately fall within the category of Stevie Ray Wannabes rather than something remotely original, in our un-humble opinion. There are as many horrific clones of the savants who supposedly used them as there are clones of the pedal itself. Still, there can be only one original, and those who pay attention know that Stevie did use them a bit early on with his blackface Vibroverbs, but veered a hard germanium right to fuzzes with his big rig, thanks in part to César Diaz. And for the record, the guys who sound good with them or other gear usually sound good with whatever they choose to sling and plug in. You know who you are.

The Tube Screemers all went through a slew of blackface Fenders – specifically, a '64 Princeton Reverb, '65 Deluxe Reverb, and a '66 Super Reverb. We stayed with single coils – a favorite blonde Big Tex Strat with Custom Shop '54s. Each pedal sounded different, no matter the same Duracell swap, offering various levels of mid-rang hump which

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seemed to choke all of our blackface amps from the get-go. Once they get turned up past '3' on the gain knob, the pedals all have a grainy, assertive gain that, to these ears, is not the slightest bit smooth or pleasing. If you barely use a Tube Screamer to grease the amps a bit, say for taking a lead on a small stage, we get it, but there are other

options currently available that do this well and don't cost hundreds of bones. The Tube Screamers also severely dump bottom end – too thin for comfort. You can get a bit of usable amusement from them, we know, and we found a minor sweet spot or two, but like Bart said, these vintage blackface Fender amps simply cranked up a bit are untouchable for tone, have always been the amps that have everyone else chasing their tails to mine warm cleans and then some. Nothing new.

The Maxon? Well, this one was similar to the overpowering and persistent high colonic we experienced after snacking at a Tex-Mex joint in New York, waiting to see Smokey Hormel.



What exactly was in those fajitas anyway, Smokey? Huh? New York is not where you want to be with the ptomaine incubus growling in your

gut... "How many more blocks to a McDonald's? You think they'd let me offload here at this Dolce & Gabbana?" Tex-Mex in New York was far from right, and neither was the hornet's nest of linear gain from the Maxon. What's left to do? How about putting them up against a pair of early B.K. Butler Tube Drivers with 1950s RCA 12AU7 blackplate pre-amp tubes? Like you've read here before, the Tube Drivers are not whisper quiet, sure as hell not true bypass, but they do offer a sweetheart wooly gain that is, for our purposes, much more natural and amusing for the money. David Gilmour, Billy F. Gibbons, and Eric J. would agree.

Analogman and Robert Keeley are also churning out modded Tube Screamer reissues with tweaks that minimize their inherent flaws, and those same users who own both vintage Tube Screamers and modded reissues will often admit that they prefer the tweaked and customized newbies. Interesting, and telling... We dropped the funky green foursome back to Bart at just past 5 a.m. on the way down to the Texas coast for a stormy surf session, and all he did was grunt, "Leave

them in the corner by the dog food... I'll put 'em back later. Got any wax for my board?" And away we went, since time, tide, ptomaine and tone wait for no man. –Riverhorse

June 9, 1915 – August 12, 2009

Tonequest Les Paul



Photo: John Peden

Les Paul has left us, but his legacy will survive as long as the electric guitar maintains its stature as the most popular and pervasive instrument in our culture, and if Guitar Hero is any indication, it won't be fading away anytime soon. By now (it's late September as we write), many tributes to Les have been rushed to press, but we didn't feel that a proper acknowledgement

of his life could be rushed. If you'd enjoy delving into a richly detailed account of Les Paul's life, we enthusiastically recommend The Early Years of the Les Paul Legacy, 1915-1963 by Robb Lawrence/Hal Leonard. This book has all the goods, bulging with rare and classic photos from Les' life and career, as well as an excellent and elegantly detailed series of chapters covering all the guitars that proudly display his name. Our first thought after hearing of Les' passing was to contact his long-time friend and co-founder of the Les Paul trio, Lou Pallo. You may recall our November 2005 cover story on Lou's amazing life and career... We waited a couple of weeks to allow Lou to field all the requests for his time that inevitably followed Les' death, and then called...

TQR: Lou, tell us how and when you and Les first met.



I met him in Greenwood Lakes, NJ. It was a really jumping summer resort area with lots of clubs, restaurants and bands playing everywhere. In the

place I was playing when I met Les we had headliners like Gene Krupa, Count Basie, the Platters, Julius LaRosa... and in the afternoon I also played in a 5-piece group doing matinees. Les was at the bar with his girlfriend and he called me over. I didn't know who he was, and when he said, "I'm Les Paul," I said, "The Les Paul?" I had no idea.

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TQR: And from there you and Les became friends, began recording at his house, and running together a little bit, correct?

Les recorded everyone that came to the house... Thumbs Carlisle, W. C. Fields, Bing Crosby... That tape machine was always on. Les was retired at the time we met, and I would pick him up on my night off and we would hit all the clubs in New Jersey, practically – sometimes as many as twenty or more in one night. I would be driving, he would run in and check out the band, and if he didn't like them we'd go on to the next place until he found one he liked. If he did like them, he'd come back out and say, "OK, park the car," and we'd go in and have a drink and listen to the band – rarely more than one set, then on to the next place. He just loved hearing guitar players.

TQR: When did you begin playing together?



We would go into the city a lot and we always had our guitars in the car. We'd go to the Red Blazer, Byrdland, the Blue Note, the Bitter End... Sometimes the act would ask us to sit in, and other times just the two of us

would get up and play. A lot of times he might play "Over the Rainbow," and no one will ever play it like Les. He played the melody, which is very hard to do, sliding right up from one octave to the next, and the sound he got on his guitar I've never heard from anyone else.

TQR: He played the Les Paul Recording Model a lot more recently, didn't he?

Yes, he played that guitar more so in the past ten years, and he also played the Heritage models – he had the first two that were built, but then again, he sounded like Les no matter what he played.

TQR: Was he really that particular about the guitars he played? He just didn't seem that finicky as guitar players go.

I guess he really wasn't so much. I saw him play a Fender once at a party, and he still sounded like Les. When he was finished playing he wrote Gibson on the headstock (laughing).

TQR: When did the two of you begin to hold down a regular gig together and how did that come about?



I had been working for 12 years at a place called Molly's Fish Market in Oakland, NJ, which was right down the street from Les' house. I started playing there in 1976 and he would come in with his

guitar and play a set with me, oh, maybe every other week. Then in 1980 we counted that he came in 83 times. I think he just wanted to get back into it, and he really liked playing small clubs. This story is also told in his book, *In My Own Words*. The word got around that Les would be there on Tuesday nights, and people were driving up from far away as Texas. They would show up asking if Les was going to be there, and I'd say, "Well, he might, or he may come in tomorrow night – you never know." People would stay over until they got to see him. The place was always packed, and everybody wanted to see Les. Then he suggested we try to get a regular job on my night off, and we wound up doing about four concerts on Sundays – just the two of us, and I was playing the guitar and playing bass pedals with my foot. The next week he had his son Gene play drums with us at a place called McDougall's, and before you know it we had people like Jimmy Dean come in... Bucky Pizzarella... and groups like Spyra Gyra and Blood Sweat and Tears. From there we moved to New York where we played Fat Tuesday's on Third and 17th every Monday night for 12 years. Then Les had a health problem and he wound up in the hospital in White Plains. I went up there with his agent, Harold Stern, and we brought the guitars up and we told him that he needed to get out of there and get back to playing music – that would be the best thing for him. That's when we started playing at the Iridium every Monday night as the Les Paul trio.

TQR: Tell us about some of the people that sat in with you over the years...



Oh, who didn't? Jimmy Page, George Benson, Rick Derringer, Vickey Carr, Ritchie Sambora and Bon Jovi, Brian May, Jeff Beck, Tony Bennett... even

Henny Youngman, Jackie Mason and Penn & Teller came in. I'm missing a lot of people, like Johnny Smith... *Everybody* came in. I should also mention Steve Miller... Les was his

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godfather, and he stood at Steve's parents' wedding. We also did a lot of college dates and we opened a couple of House of Blues venues. One of the biggest things we did was in the '80s – the Guitar Expo in Seville, Spain. They had everyone you could think of – Keith Richards, Bob Dylan, and here we were playing on this huge stage as just a small trio... Les did 78 interviews when he was in Seville for that show. Here's the oldest guy out there, and he does 78 interviews. He just loved talking to people.

TQR: And who knew him better than you? What kind of man was he?



Photo: John Peden

Well, when my mother passed away, I went to the wake on the first day and there was this huge flower arrangement from Les. He came to the wake and said, "Look, tomorrow I'm taking you out to dinner and we're just going to relax, because I know what you are going through." That says it all.

TQR: And he never really stopped fooling around with sound, did he?

No. Back in 1975 he was making new pickups, and every time he came into Molly's he would have different pickups in his guitar, always trying to get a new sound. He had 31 rooms in that house, and every room was full of equipment – there was no place to sit down. He had every Ampex machine ever made... it was unbelievable. There were so many tapes, and every show we played at Fat Tuesday's and the Iridium was recorded on tape and video, every week, two shows a night.

TQR: Did Les have any of the old original Les Pauls?



Photo: John Peden

Oh, sure. He kept *everything*. And I really don't know why he didn't get more recognition for what he accomplished. With the sound-on-sound recordings he made in 1950, if you put a Les Paul and Mary Ford record on in a juke box, everything else sounded dead. He experimented so much as a kid, punching different holes in the sheet music of his mother's player piano, for instance. I don't know how he did it, but whatever 'it' is, Les had it.

The Last Les Paul

"What range do we want? From a Rolls Royce to a Volkswagen. We wanted to cover the whole range, give the amateur guitarist to the professional his needs. Finest quality instruments for its price – a moderate price. Encourage them to be a musician... instead of using a cheap instrument."

– Les Paul



You might think we'd pull out all the stops and endeavor to unveil a rare and unobtainable example of the classic Les Paul line as a tribute to the man himself... and while that would be a sexy and tantalizing move, such 'vintage' taunting seems pointless if not self-serving today, and certainly of little practical value to working folk. Most of us are familiar with the classic models of the past – the way they have aged from having been played for a living, or remained remarkably preserved under the bed. Regardless of age, every well-made guitar reveals a distinct personality, voice and feel. It is the unpredictable nature of guitar building and the results achieved that make these instruments so fascinating, and you and I powerless to stop acquiring them. However, the joker in the deck is never taken into account by vintage guitar dealers or their clients... You'll never see a collectable guitar being sold at a steep discount because "it's a dead plank" any more



than you're likely to find an owner who forked over a small fortune who's willing to admit he's got a Historic in the closet that sounds and plays better than his vintage drooler ever will. Doesn't work that way, and the truth is, while there are definitely many stunning old guitars in existence, most of them remain locked up, never to be heard again – too valuable to be played in public. Yeah, roll that thought around in your mind for awhile... The good news is that stunning new guitars also happen to fall out of the pile of mass-produced 'custom' instruments from time to time, and while they may require some patience and determination to be found, they exist, and in far greater numbers than the available vintage models you probably can't afford anymore.

Sadly, Midtown Music here in Atlanta is closing. By the time you read this the front door may well be locked for good, and

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if you've been with us for a while, you know it was a prime hunting

ground for us from our first issue, eleven years ago. Owner Dave Tiller is still a relatively young and energetic man, but to coin a familiar phrase from an older man, "The thrill is gone." When the used trade-in market dried up several years ago, Midtown positioned itself exclusively as a dealer in Custom Shop instruments, top-of-the-line Martin and Gibson acoustics, and custom guitar amplification, earning the distinction of being the number one Dr. Z dealer in the country in 2007. But slipping margins, escalating demands to maintain inventory from manufacturers and a stanky economy changed the game... To make money moving new guitars today, you have to move a lot at skinnier margins than in the past. After 25 years, Dave simply said, "I've had enough."

We stopped in to say hello and check out his clearance inventory a few weeks ago, and when a NOS Victoria Victoriette beckoned us for an audition, we walked back to the bare walls of the guitar room and pulled down the last Gibson electric that would ever be sold at Midtown – a new old stock 2006 '57 Les Paul Junior. Plugged into the 1x12 Victoria, the amp sounded predictably lush, but we were more impressed



by the sound of the Junior as we played at polite 'store volume.' The Junior's voice seemed fundamentally bigger than any of those we'd played or owned in the past by far – inexplicably huge and juicy, deep as it is wide. We shut down the Victoriette and walked back into the main room and pulled up a stool next to Dave's desk, strumming the Junior unplugged as we had

done so many times before. Dave explained that the '06 Junior had been stored in the case until earlier this year by chance, since he would usually only display two or three of the same model and finish at a time, leaving identical guitars stored in the back. By the luck of the draw, this guitar had lingered in storage for close to three years. As we strummed away, we recovered our senses long enough to sight the neck, which revealed a big-ass whoop – a concave bow of considerable proportions. 'Got a truss rod tool, Dave?' We loosened

the strings, checked the truss rod tension (loose) and cranked the nut it as far as seemed prudent since we didn't own it, but much of the bow persisted. We asked Dave for our usual extended evaluation at home, he agreed, and we took the Junior home, optimistic, yet conflicted. After all, we hadn't walked into the store looking for another guitar...



Once home, we cut the strings off, completely removed the truss rod nut, lubed the threads with a drop of 3 in 1, and tightened the rod without much effect, even in the absence of

string tension. Then we tightened it some more... and some more... but the neck still wasn't quite straight. Could it ever be? Not to be deterred, we consulted with Joe Glaser and the Gibson Nashville repair shop for possible solutions after reading what Dan Erlewine also had to say in his repair book. Two strategies were suggested – clamp the neck straight and apply heat to the entire fingerboard for a short period of time, or simply clamp the neck straight without heat and give the neck a chance to respond to the back pressure from the clamp



over a longer period of time. OK... now comes the obligatory 'don't try this at home...'

We threw on a set of Pyramid .010-.048s, loosened and snugly tightened the truss rod nut again, and then placed a knee behind the heel of the neck with the guitar body anchored upright and tilted slightly forward on a Persian rug, pulled back on the neck at the nut with our left hand until the neck sighted straight, and then continued to gradually tighten the nut. We repeated this 'treatment' several times over a few days, allowing the neck to 'rest' each time, and... success! The Junior's neck is now straight, and oh, by the way, the volume and resonance of the guitar unplugged

jumped up even more in the process.



It is difficult to be certain when you have reached the point where further tightening might strip the nut or break the rod, and we'll admit that this commando experiment could have sent us to Stewart McDonald for their Truss Rod Rescue Kit... Thankfully, it didn't, and we believe that straightening the neck as described as we patiently adjusted the truss rod was key to our success.

Best of all, our 8.2 pound Junior is a

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prime example of an *exceptional* draw from the Custom Shop at Gibson. A glori-

ously happy accident of semi-unintended consequences that contrived to deliver a truly phenomenal axe. We measured the stock P90 at 8.16K wondering if it could be the source of the magic, which of course, it is (and it ain't coming out). We also pulled the stock 'Bumble Bee' tone cap and replaced it with a vintage Bumble Bee along with a 250K tone pot for a wider sweep – an essential move for a single pickup Gibson. Un't some more? Find a cool old Sprague Black Beauty tone cap in the .008 - .015mf range (not the usual .022) for the neck pickup in your humbucking guitars – it'll drain off some of the woofiness and add welcome spank to the top three strings. And while we can't *prove* it, we believe that the + 8 pound weight is adding some serious mojo to the Junior, with bloom and sustain that resonate like a gong throughout the neck and body beneath the pickup.



One shortcoming you'll find in the Historic Juniors are the vintage style 3-on-a-strip tuners. We replaced ours with a nickel 'kidney bean' Kluson set from TonePros that had been sent to us as with a press release a couple of years ago. First, we aged them for 3-5 seconds in a bath of Radio Shack etching solution (thanks for the tip, Big Tex!) Just wipe the tuners down with a soft cloth while wearing latex

gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, submerge 'em in the solution briefly, rinse well in cold water and let dry completely. You'll be thrilled with the results, and this works on any nickel hardware – but not chrome. We also plugged six holes leftover from the original tuners with round toothpicks (they blended perfectly with the white finish for a pro job), and believe it... as we've said before – these tuners are *flawless*.

Kalamazoo's 'Esquire'

This is our second review of a Historic '57 Les Paul Junior, and it is ironic that our first was another '06 acquired from Midtown for the September 2006 issue in which we assembled a rig somewhat similar to Crazy Horse guitarist Frank 'Pancho' Sampedro's, utilizing P90s and a very horny Vox AC50. Over the years we've indulged in all kinds of P90 guitars in these pages – three Historic '54 goldtops, SGs, two Les Paul Specials, a non-reverse dual P90 Firebird, Eastwood Stormbird, a Nik Huber Junior and Special, Chuck Thornton's Blues Queen, a '66 ES330, Hamer Monaco and two Hamer Juniors (we're probably forgetting something).



While they were all worthy instruments in their own unique style, we want you to know that the single cutaway/single pickup '57 Historic Les Paul Junior occupies rare air unlike any other guitar we've ever played, whether for cleaner tones or a mahogany melt-down. In fact, if you'd really like to know what an exceptional example of a PAF bridge pickup

sounds like, forget what you know, and even what you see... Disregard the noise and strap on a Junior with Gibson's stock P90. Remember – when Seth Lover designed the PAF, he used the same wire and magnets found in Gibson's P90.

Disregard the hum, and you'll experience what we've often described among the handful of extraordinary PAFs reviewed here – brilliant harmonic depth, clarity and string definition



within chords, and an open, airy musicality and dynamic response that simply does not exist in the vast majority of production humbuckers today. Yet in all respects, the '57 Les Paul Junior continues to be underestimated and overlooked as a relatively inexpensive, stripped-down utility instrument severely limited by just one pickup. Think again. There is something utterly magical in the

single dog-ear P90 and the way it is nestled in the shallow rout of that big mahogany slab. Soapbar P90s just don't seem to sound quite the same, and we suspect that the lack of the additional capacitance and magnetic string pull added by a second pickup is contributing to the unique and exceptional



sound of the '57 Les Paul Junior. None of this was intended, mind you... Do we care? No, we don't. Get yours now. To make things a little

easier, we have arranged for ToneQuest readers to acquire a '57 with free shipping in the USA from Dave's Guitar Shop in Lacrosse, WI. They aren't permitted to post images of their Gibson inventory on the web site, but they have 'em in stock. *Quest forth...To*

www.davesguitar.com, 608-785-7704

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