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*The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone* Report™  
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## The Art of Tone

*Take a moment to consider just how many guitarists living and gone you can name that have truly created an unmistakably unique, immediately recognizable, signature tone. With your short list tallied, does it seem slightly illogical that so many musicians could put their stamp on one instrument so forcefully? Just how many distinctly different tones can be coaxd from a guitar? With so much time passed and the music of so many players written and recorded, will the well from which we draw the inspiration to create new sounds and music ever run dry, or is the quest for tone as infinite as the universe?*



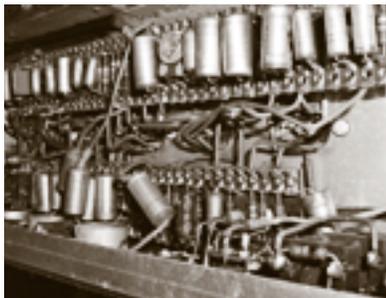
*Like the heavens above, it's a safe bet that inspiration and creativity are infinite – that's not the problem at all. The greatest threat to creativity and the quest for tone is really quite simple: Beware that you become too busy and distracted to fully receive your creative gifts. Few of us lack ideas – only the time to explore them. And in this age of "multi-tasking" and perpetual connectivity, it isn't getting any easier. Hang up and play.*

*To some, the very title of these pages hints at the lowest kind of snobbery and wanton gear fetish, as if what you own defines you. Indeed, the constantly evolving musical equipment industry often feeds off the idea that "you are what you play" to insure its growth and survival. So it goes for the automotive and fashion industries, and especially the business of entertainment, where the game is all about selling the largest possible marketing demographic cultivated images to emulate. But that's not what we're selling here.*

*Like music, the art of tone is a calling, not a transaction. You can buy the toys, but owning them doesn't assure artistic ascension. Yet we are often tempted to assume that if we play what our*

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heroes play, we will somehow become enabled to hear what they hear and play with their emotion. This is not necessarily an empty promise...



Having just seen Daniel Lanois playing a vintage candy panel AC30 with a Bigsby-equipped '54 Goldtop (P90's) and a pedal steel (through the Vox!), we were deeply

inspired to explore his rig. Whatever inspires you works.

The art of tone seems to be practiced at the highest level by players who universally share an essential trait: when it comes to music and tone, they are exceptionally thoughtful – patiently willing to commit time and intense concentration to the long-term pursuit of inspiring tones with no fear of failure or disappointment. To these players, every discovery is a success, even when they merely discover that something doesn't work. They soldier on, always willing to experience a new sound because they are wise enough to realize that no matter how long or how well they play, or how good they may sound on a given night, there will always be new melodic themes and textures to explore, and new tones that complete their musical thoughts just a little more than those that came before.

“To presuppose perfection is to assume that there is an end to creativity, and I don't believe that end exists.

When you discover one thing, it will lead to something else.

There is a confidence that you build and actually, a leap of faith. You get a sense of the enormous potential of the guitar...

There is just so much that you can do with coloring phrases that goes back to the influences of my heroes, which is to support the lyric of the song.

When you think more in terms of a lyricist and also playing that way on guitar, it affects you that way.

Looking back, I realize that all along, the thing I tried to achieve the most was to learn to sing the guitar.”

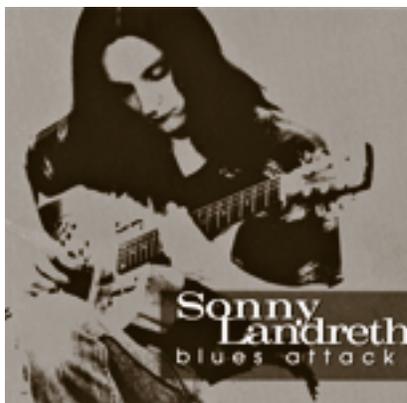
– Sonny Landreth, TQR December 2003

By now we might assume that most of you are quite familiar with Sonny Landreth, but it's all too easy to be an earnest straggler on this journey, too. It doesn't really matter whether you have ever seen Sonny live or that you have yet to hear his recordings – as long as you do. Given the theme of this edition of *The Quest*, your full appreciation for the art of tone cannot fully gestate in Sonny Landreth's absence, and your personal quest for tone will be destined to end in an unfortunate miscarriage. It's just that simple. Sonny Landreth is just that special.



At a pivotal point in his life, Sonny temporarily left his hometown of Lafayette, Louisiana to insure his full and permanent return in mind, body and spirit. In his words, he “sat around playing guitar day and night, making up

and experimenting with all kinds of tunings.” He studied the fingerpicking techniques of Chet Atkins and played the lap-steel at a time when bottleneck slide seemed impossible to decipher, and then he had a dream... “I was sitting on a bandstand and Clarence White was playing. Now, I'd never met Clarence White, but in my dream I said something to him about the problems I was having and he said, ‘Man, what you need to do is use heavier gauge strings.’ And that's just what Sonny did, tuning his Melody Maker to an E chord with heavy roundwounds, enabling him to discover the tenuous balance required between the weight of the slide and the strings to produce singing sustain on a 6-string guitar.



Not long after his return to the bayou, Sonny was playing with Clifton Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band at Tipitina's, and in 1980 he recorded his first solo album, *Blues Attack*, in Crowley,

Louisiana. *Down in Louisiana* was released in 1985, and in 1992 Sonny launched the first of what would become three recordings in a trilogy – *Outward Bound*, *South of I10* (1995) and *Levee Town* (2000). Between tours with his own 3-piece band, Sonny has also played on sessions with Marshall Crenshaw, BeauSoleil, Michael Doucet, Jimmy Buffett, John Mayall, Zachary Richard, Junior Wells, Jerry Douglas, Mark Knopfler, and the motherload of John Hiatt's very best work as a member of *The Goners*. *The Road We're On* debuted in 2003, followed by his most recent release – a live CD recorded in Lafayette, Louisiana at the Grant Street dancehall.

All of Sonny Landreth's recordings merit your rapt attention.

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*He is not only one of the most unique and gifted guitarists in the world, but an exceptional singer and songwriter whose music captures the soul of Zydeco, Cajun folk music, Delta blues and full-tilt boogie. But Sonny's music also takes the guitar far beyond familiar musical forms and into completely uncharted territory where no other guitarist has ever ventured, playing behind the slide and exploiting harmonic overtones, swampy Cajun rhythms and tube distortion in ways previously unimaginable. That he can perform such feats is remarkable enough, but to appreciate the fact that he invented them is all the more inspiring and humbling. We suggest that like us, you jump into the trilogy with Outward Bound and proceed through his entire catalog, arriving, finally, at Grant Street – the next best thing to actually seeing Landreth live. Last year while Sonny was preparing to play a small club in London, Eric Clapton called. "Would it be possible for me to be placed on the guest list?" he asked. "I think we can manage that," Sonny replied, and EC drove solo from his home hours away and sat quietly in a dark corner of the club, completely unnoticed as he too experienced the highest form of the art of tone. And so shall you. Now log on to [www.tonequest.com](http://www.tonequest.com), turn your speakers up, and Enjoy...*

## Sonny Landreth – Live at Grant Street

**TQR:** Grant Street is your first *live* recording...



The first *official* live album... We actually attempted one years ago in Chicago, but we waited until way too late in the year. I was really burnt and my voice was shot, and we

also realized mid way through just how terrible the stage sounded. We really had a hard time overcoming the bleed factor with my vocal and guitar. But you know, the good thing is that this time around we knew more about what to expect and the pitfalls to avoid. The best thing I did was choose to record at Grant Street here in my hometown of Lafayette. We do this medicine show at Grant Street every Christmas for the Dr. Tommy Comeaux Memorial Fund, and we have always recorded it. I started listening back to the tapes that featured different groups over the years and realized just how great it sounds recording here. So we had that going for us, and our engineer, Tony Daigle, is literally two



want to get the separation that you get in the studio, when in fact, you've got to let it wash a bit. When you start opening up the room mics, yeah, you do lose definition, but you pick up so much more feel. There's no way I could play like that on my couch or in the studio, because you feed off the energy from the crowd.

**TQR:** We heard the same thing on the live recording – you're taking chances that a studio environment can't inspire.

Well, I just decided to let it rip. Going into this, I had to have a little talk with myself (laughing), and there were two ground rules: number one – it's gonna be a real live album with no overdubs, and number two – since we were recording 90 minute sets on both Friday and Saturday night, we would just take the ten or eleven songs that came out the best, or were the least embarrassing, which ever came first (laughing). If you think about it, a lot of so-called "live" albums are anything but. By the time everyone wants to re-do their part here and there you have a live audience soundtrack in the background and the performance gets re-recorded four months later.

**TQR:** It's a 3-piece band and it all comes down to you, singing and playing. Touring as much as you do, I don't imagine that knocking out the performance was a big concern...

Well, what happens for a lot of people is that the pressure goes way up because you're looking at this one moment in time when you know everything's hot, everything's runnin', and it's all going down to tape. Otherwise, it's another night out on the road and you tend to not be so self-conscious. I just decided to do what we do every night, document another

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night on the road at a good time when we've been playing a lot, but not too much, and when all the travel time hasn't caught up with us later in the year.

**TQR:** Were there many moments when you were able to forget about the shows being recorded?



Those were the moments that I enjoyed the most and they did happen. The biggest struggle for me is singing and playing guitar at the same time. There's a thing that happens with my voice... people send me bootlegs sometimes and if I put them on I often think, "My god, is *that* what I

sound like?" I realize that the guitar is taking all I've got in a way, and it makes me push my voice in a very strange way that I wouldn't normally do. If I'm just singing in the studio and overdubbing I can relax and get good breath support and push – all the things you're supposed to do – but playing live, sometimes it's as if I'm riding a wild beast and just hanging on for dear life. And yet, the edge and the excitement of it and getting caught up in the moment is what I wanted to capture on the live record. Recognizing what I was doing with my voice has actually helped me and I think I've made an adjustment for the better – I just wish I'd done it before we recorded the album (laughing).

**TQR:** You mentioned that you had the opportunity to get into Grant Street early that week and really get your sound on stage worked out.

We had everything set up and running, figuring out where the best mic placements were in the room and getting my rig sorted out, and that helped. I was originally supposed to have the whole place to myself for the week, and at the last minute I found out there was a crawfish boil for 500 people one night, Donna the Buffalo playing on another night, and a lot of times it was like a 3-ring circus during the week, but by Friday night we really hit the ground running.

**TQR:** Did you wind up doing much post-EQ or adding additional effects to the recording?

Oh, yeah, we did, but we really leaned more on the sound of

the room mics. Mostly what you're hearing is the delay on the guitar blending in with room sounds, but keep in mind that the basic mics we used to capture the ambience of the room are what's creating that wash, and when you do that you're going to get it all. That's why you can hear beer bottles clanking and breaking, and I think those room sounds are what makes it.

**TQR:** How did you have your rig set up?

I had two going – a Dumble Overdrive Special pushing a Bandmaster cab with two Vintage 30's, and the cabinet was in a kind of hidden room behind the stage where they used to store ice. I had the Dumble head on stage, of course, and a very early Matchless DC30 with another Bandmaster cabinet loaded with EV's. That's a little bit of a trick there, too, because I find that the Matchless has a really beautiful compression and midrange but it's a bit too mushy on stage with Vintage 30's. The Dumble can go either way – it's great with Vintage 30's and a lot of other different speakers.

**TQR:** And you blended the sound of the two cabs when you mixed the recording...



Yeah, I didn't want to be too loud, but at the same time be able to get the power tubes sweating for that *sound*... The DC30 works at a nice stage

volume that is great in that room. I really didn't use any effects other than a T-Rex Replica delay and a Keeley compressor. For me personally, I need it to be as simple as possible. The less I have to think about in terms of gadgetry and gear, the more I can concentrate on the acrobatics of trying to play guitar, sing in tune and remember the words (laughing).

**TQR:** Which guitars did you play?

I used to use a lot of different guitars – a Firebird, Les Paul, Strats, a Tele, Trussart... I love doing that, but in order to raise the bar technically with what's going on with the guitar and the music, simpler is better. As a 3-piece band, you're keeping a certain momentum going all the time, and it's easier to do that by just letting it fly and playing. I ended up using the two road Strats that I typically play, the vintage '66 Strat, and I had the '60 Les Paul on the first night but decided to stick with the Strats on the second night. The road Strats

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have DiMarzio Virtual Vintage pickups, and on any songs in the key of 'G' I played the '66 with original vintage pickups. The neck pickup on one of the road Strats is a DiMarzio Fast Track 1 and I use that for a technique

where I fingerpick harmonics. The first blade is right where you'd find the 24th fret, so that pickup makes it easier to do what I need to do. That guitar has three different pickups in it, actually.

**TQR:** A lot of people probably wonder how you can create the degree of sustain, harmonics, depth, clarity and power from a Stratocaster with no effects pushing it.

That comes from the finger-style approach. There are just so many things you can do to change the sound and the shape of the note by what part of the finger you use, where you play on the strings – closer to the bridge, in-between, up by the neck, or even beyond. It totally changes what you hear and I've become more and more aware of that, matching it with where it serves the song best. It really is a vocabulary that creates a more lyrical style and approach. Since I learned



Chet Atkins' approach to fingerstyle guitar, it made me much more aware of the guitar as a solo instrument with a fingerpicked part, with a bass pattern, a melody, and at the same time having something rhythmic going on. It

makes a more complex sound on stage with a trio, and that's what I love about taking these songs that were much more of a production piece in the studio and interpreting them as a 3-piece band.

**TQR:** With your concept of a trilogy completed with the

release of *The Road We're On* in 2003, doing a live recording with the benefit of having your own gear in a familiar venue instead of rolling out with a rented 4x12 Marshall cabinet in a strange room...

That is the bane of my existence. Since we fly to most of our dates, we can't take all of our gear, so that part of the live recording in Lafayette was really a thrill. On the road, it's a roll of the dice. Sometimes you wind up with a really good cabinet with my preference for Celestion Vintage 30's that aren't brand spanking new, although I'll take that any day



over speakers that are too tired. But once in a while it's just the worst thing you can imagine and you know from

that first downbeat that you've got a long night ahead of you. I always take my Dumble Overdrive Special with me, and that's another thing – you have to use an amp that can survive the baggage handlers...

**TQR:** Are the variables on the road for you limited to your backline speaker cabinet, or more?

It's potentially everything... the drum kit that's falling apart, blown bass speakers, bad monitors (or lack thereof). It's whatever has been put into the front of the house. Then, what kind of room is it? Some of them are the most godawful sounding places you've ever heard in your life.

**TQR:** And who's running the board...

And who's *running* this show, anyway? (laughing). When you look out you can just feel it. You can tell that it's not getting across, and it's not just the puzzled looks on people's faces. Typically, for me it's the vocal. Let's face it – it's a big guitar sound and a little voice. That works to my advantage when everything is as it should be, but in some of those situations where you don't have it all going for you, it comes down to that "commando combo/paying your dues" thing.

**TQR:** I'm somewhat surprised that you used just two pedals at Grant Street, because we have photographic evidence from other venues that reveals a considerable number of pedals in your rig. Whether you *use* them or not...

(Laughing) They *look* cool though...

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**TQR:** ...or perhaps they were there in case you *might* could need them...

Well, now that's a good point. In the road case there are various pedals for that very reason. If my amp should go down or



if the gear has to go to one city while I have to do a promotional gig for the radio station, you really need to have that with you because you just don't know what you'll run up against. **With a decent Twin I can do any gig.** I have enough effects with me to make that work and actually enjoy myself, too. You've got to have a back up rig, and what we do is have a first, second and third choice for backline. I'll always have a complete back up rig – usually a Marshall head and a 4x12 cabinet. I need the cabinet anyway for my Dumble head, and the 1960A Marshall 4x12 enables you to go stereo or mono, so in a smaller club I just use it as a 2x12 and if we're outside I'll use all four speakers.

**TQR:** And you always ask for a back up amp...

Either a Marshall DSL 2000 (I also ask for a Plexi but they never have it) and they almost always have a Twin. That way, worst case scenario I can use my head and the speakers in the



Twin, and I always carry a couple of cables for that. And if something should happen to my head and I'm playing a Twin, I have pedals with me to make that work.

The '65 Reissue is pretty consistent and I can make them work. My worst fear is the red-knob Twins. In fact, it's on the rider... "No red-knob or silverface Twins." Right after that is, "No Cajun food."

**TQR:** We heard a rumor about a Sonny Landreth Signature Strat... Are the rest of us going to be capable of playing this guitar?

(Laughs) There will probably be a couple of different models

– an affordable version and a Custom Shop model. The most significant part of the whole process is the neck, because this is the first instrument they will have built as strictly a slide guitar. They are utilizing graphite rods alongside the truss rod to make the most of the .013-.056 gauge strings I use. Of course, we want it to intonate as precisely as possible, the pickups are important, and as much mass as possible under the bridge so that it really resonates. I'm not sure if I want it to be a hardtail or not. I like them both, and I'm not sure which I like better. It's amazing once you start the concept of responsibly developing a guitar with your name on it – you really start splitting hairs. But for years I've been talking about doing this or doing that with guitars... changing parts out... having one body with a certain neck, changing out pickups, of course, and routing out the body under the pick-guard, which is an old John Mooney trick. You find what works for you and what doesn't, but a slide guitar is an entirely different beast. The neck will be the same as mine and we're striving for a neck that is sleek enough that it has that nice feel and contour, yet at the same time has enough mass to produce that big, open sound. We all know that those big necks have such a great sound...

**TQR:** And you seem to prefer a maple fingerboard...

Well, man, I like them both, so we're probably going to offer that, too, but I do like the brighter sound of maple, that snap, and the way the harmonics ring out. I love the woodier,



warmer, throatier quality of rosewood, too, but again, it also depends on the pickups – everything affects everything else.

And I want it to be as light as possible, although it's getting harder to build a mass-produced guitar with really light swamp ash.

**TQR:** Now all we need is a Sonny Landreth amp...

Yeah, we can get Alexander (Dumble) to build one every ten years (laughing).

**TQR:** What's on your mind for the next recording?

That's a good question... It's been done to death, but I'm thinking about doing a duet thing, or at least featured guests, and all of them would be heroes that I've become friends with over the years. The thing that would make it really different is

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that it wouldn't just be my songs, but material that we have co-written together. It may sound crazy, but I also did this thing with the Acadiana Symphony in December and I'd like to do something with strings some day. Or we could just start doing our albums live at Grant Street... the Chronicles. [To](http://www.sonnylandreth.com)

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

## the Not-So-Humble **Dumble**

Shrouded in mystery and urban legend, Dumble amplifiers have attained mystical status as the most coveted and costly guitar amplifier ever built. Many of the players using amps built by Alexander (a.k.a. "Howard") Dumble got in the game early when Dumble custom built amplifiers for specific artists, often voicing them for the individual playing styles of his elite L.A. customers. We've been told by someone who should know that David Lindley was a chief test pilot for the Dumble Overdrive Special way back in the '70s, and it is a fact that both Lindley and late Little Feat guitarist Lowell George were among the very first to play Dumbles on stage. Lowell George also owned a Dumble-modified Fender



Lowell George & David Lindley

Showman, and other Fender amps modified by Dumble surely must exist. Fans of the Dumble

Overdrive Special include John Mayer, Robben Ford, Steve Kimock, Rick Vito, Stephen Bruton, Henry Kaiser, Carlos Santana and Steve Carlton. Dumble built heads, combos and extension cabinets, and an even rarer model called the Steel String Singer, played by Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Most of the early Dumble amps initially sold for \$5,000 new, and today vintage Overdrive Specials cost \$30,000 and climbing. We have heard Sonny's Dumble amp many times in large and small venues, as well as Stephen Bruton and Steve Kimock playing their Overdrive Specials live and on recordings, but until now we've never had access to a Dumble for review. Early this year, John Mayer graciously provided us with one of his Overdrive Specials for a thorough evaluation, and we were not disappointed.

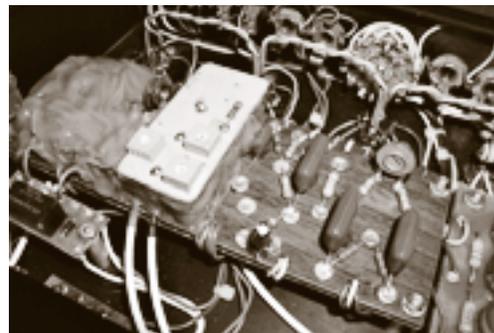
Of course, the burning question on every guitarist's lips is, "What's so special about the Overdrive Special?" In terms of their collectible value, only a few hundred were built, and given their mystical status among so many renowned players,



supply and demand have caused their value to double every five

years. Does a Dumble *sound* so much better than any other amplifier to justify its \$30,000 price tag? Of course not. The high cost of a Dumble today is based on its collectible value and rarity. Strictly speaking, John Mayer's Overdrive Special does sound incredibly good, as do those played by the artists we've seen play them live, but these days you can get very close to the tone, power and dynamic vibe of a Dumble for a lot less money. For those of you who are strongly motivated to own a Dumble, understand that they are worth precisely whatever just one motivated buyer is willing to pay, and a Dumble with special provenance will demand even more. And as more Dumbles are taken out of circulation and placed into private collections, their value will continue to appreciate.

In addition to being a very clever and creative designer and builder, Dumble is nobody's fool, and it has often been his practice to pot the heart of his preamp circuit to prevent duplication. And why not? He certainly created a design worth protecting. John Mayer's Dumble is equipped with a quad of EL34's rather than 6L6's, but we'd describe the clean



tone of this amp as very Fender-like, only bigger, with tremendous sparkle on the

top and the unmistakable linear, laser focus of a great Twin. With the gain kicked in from the Overdrive circuit, the Dumble produces a thick, polyphonic roar that remains intact and in full bloom even at lower volume settings. This amp has a distinctly unique voice that is hard to describe in words – a specific timbre that seems to lurk beneath everything you play, regardless of how the controls are set, but once heard, it is unmistakably "Dumble." It is not coincidental that a big amplifier like the Dumble delivers a robust ambient tone and dynamic feel that simply cannot be duplicated by lower-powered amplifiers. The classic sound of a great 50W Hiwatt or Marshall is hard to beat, but they don't succeed in reproduc-

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ing the spatial effect of their 100W siblings. The notes produced by big amps are simply bigger, and that's a fact.

If you're captivated by the Dumble but hobbled by the price of entry, take heart – you've got options. But first, let's acquire a credible perspective on Dumble amps with the help of a truly stellar guitarist and amp tech, Todd Sharp.

**TQR:** You owned and played not one, but two Dumbles when you were with Christine McVie and also Rod Stewart, yet there seems to be a veil and a mystique hanging over them, probably because so few of us have ever played one. What can you tell us about them?



I don't claim to know all about them, but I did own two that were built for me and they were unique and different. Mine were big-ass heads with four 6550's, reverb, tremolo, and the overdrive channel, but most people are familiar with the Overdrive Specials.

I've had a number of those in the shop and they actually had Fender Twin or Showman transformers (same thing). Dumbles really *are* very Fender-like, and if you think about it, there isn't that much new or terribly original in guitar amp designs from the past 30 years. Fenders and Marshalls are essentially the same circuit and very little was done differently. There is a slight difference in cap values, the value of the slope resistor... Marshall used the cathode follower to drive the tone stack and Fender used the plate... The earliest Vox amps didn't even have tone controls – just a single "cut" control. Traynor had unique tone controls that were outside the Fender circuit and Ampex definitely did their own thing, so in that respect, a Dumble is a Fender, but Dumble is also a custom builder. He is a unique and different individual who I got to know personally, and I think I understand him better now that I do this kind of work myself than I did when I was just trying to get my amps from him to play. I think he is very caring about his work and his amps were his babies – he wasn't interested in letting them go until he was completely happy with the way they sounded. As far as the Overdrive Specials are concerned, even if the tone circuit wasn't epoxied to prevent you from seeing what he was doing, I don't think you'd find anything terribly unique. The component selection would have been done to the nines, not that there is anything terribly expensive or fancy there... He may have



used a couple of Mylar caps or Orange Drops here and there. He usually used metal film resistors, which is interesting, because everybody else seems to prefer carbon comps hands down. He used good quality pots and sockets, and his circuit boards were kind of crude, home made things which were not exactly point-to-point. He made amazing-sounding amps building his own boards, but they aren't built like most builders. I think what you see in the circuit is very close to a Fender Twin, but you'll see a little more attention paid to the phase inverter – what he used in the feedback resistors and his special selection of components. He did something different in the feedback loop... I looked at Rick Vito's Dumble and it seemed that he had found an opportunity to find a different shape in that amp. It's like if you took a really sweet sounding Twin to Alexander and said, "Just tweak this thing out for me," he would have given you back an Overdrive Special more or less. And of course, he has the three toggle switches that are sort of his trademark, labeled "rock/jazz," "bright/deep," and "mid." I never quite got the "rock/jazz" switch and I think I always left it in one position or the other. Personally, I always wished they did something different, just like every other guitar player with a switch on his amp. "If it only did this..." (laughing). And then he also had two inputs that seem to be another



signature of his. In the "normal" input the guitar

goes straight to a tube and in the "FET" input it goes to a unique stage that is a little hotter and makes the amp sound a little more hi-fi – maybe a little less rock & roll with a wider range. FET stands for a *field effect transistor* and it's a high impedance device that is voltage controlled so it almost behaves like a tube. It's a transistor but it doesn't act like one.

**TQR:** We know that Dumble modified a Showman for Lowell George before he was building his own amps...

And there you have it. He modified a Showman and I understand that perfectly. I wasn't thinking along the lines of a Dumble, but I've modified and built a few amps from

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Showmans and Twins because there you have a perfect chassis and a set of great sounding

transformers. I'm sure that is how he began building amps, and make no bones about it, the transformers I've seen in Overdrive Specials were all Fenders. He inserted another stage of gain for his overdrive and as far as I know, he was the first guy to do it. When I first played his amp it floored me. It was the ultimate guitar player's amp. You plugged in and thought, "Oh, my god – this is the best amp I've ever heard and it's going to make a difference in my life." The overdrive channel was a lot of that, and while no one else was doing it, what he did wasn't all that revolutionary. But the attention he paid to exactly how it *sounded* is what made it sound so good. He didn't just throw in a tube and say "here's more gain" – he threw in a tube and he filtered it and made it sound *really* nice. And while I don't know this for sure, I have to think that he must be a guitar player to have done that so well. We've talked about this before, but a lot of this isn't sound at all – it has nothing to do with sound – it has to do with *touch*. A good amp makes your fingerboard feel better – it makes your strings feel lighter... A good amp lets all that happen. You know what it's like on any given day... "Who put these .011's on here? I swear my action is high tonight... I wonder if my neck is bowed?" But nothing has really changed – you're just playing through a shitty amp or you aren't hearing it right that night (laughing). You're fighting the guitar *because* of the amp. And the beauty of the Dumble – the holy grail – is that he knew how to build an amp that lets you stop fighting your guitar and *play* it. And the Overdrive circuit is magic – just listen to Lowell George or Larry Carlton or Robben Ford and you can hear that creamy, thick distortion that no one else was getting. The Dumble was thick, rich and delicious.

**TQR:** And today, are there other options that can put you in that same that place?

Well, I think there are, but then I'd have to start bragging about my own designs which I don't exactly have to "market" yet, though I have been building one-offs for a few people. Although my approach is different, I have a much greater admiration for Dumble because it's harder than hell to do it. It's like a profession for a retired guy who can say, "I've got nothing better to do with my life but take my time and do this *just right*." Paying attention to all that detail... Even some of the boutique amps I see that are beautifully built by people with admirable skills just don't seem to have that *something*... Whoever is building them doesn't have the ear or true instinct for it. I don't meant to be arrogant about it, but I can do it



when I have the time. It can be done. But my philosophy may be a little different from Dumble's, which is to take an amp like a Showman or a Twin and make it sound as good as you could ever get it to sound with embellishments like the FET input, the different tone coloration switches... little tricks, if not particularly clever electronically, but they work well. And then you have the Overdrive circuit, which was unique and probably the best onboard overdrive ever. But still, the approach is, you've got this big, powerful amp, and if you get the right Twin – the one that puts out about 70 watts – that's a pretty sweet sounding amp. My approach there is that you still have that kind of overdrive, but you also current-limit the output stage to give you a 65W, a 50W and a 30W amp on one chassis. But with that I should probably shut up because I don't need to be giving away what I've been working on. Although overdrive is kinda neat, I think we've learned that we seem to prefer the sound of a real amp being overdriven.

**TQR:** The power seems to have a lot to do with it, because even when you knock the volume down on the Dumble, it never gets that faux overdriven tone – that zizzy, fizzy tone we associate so often with master volume circuits and lower powered amps that are attenuated.



Well, that is a trick. There is definitely a correlation between the size of the iron... Matter of fact, I built my amp on the chassis of a red-knob Twin for a guy just as an experiment, and that fuckin' thing sounded unbelievably good when I was done. I think the output transformer may have been even bigger than a normal Twin, and I like a big output transformer where the core isn't being saturated so quickly – especially where you are creating preamp distortion. They seem to pass distortion better. A distorted signal through big iron sounds really good. **TO**

Todd Sharp, Nashville Amplifier Service  
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## the **Two-Rock** Custom Signature Reverb

The evolution of Two Rock amplifiers has been rapid and deliberately aimed at achieving a benchmark for handbuilt amplifiers that offers both clean, powerful tones and rich tube distortion. Our very first Two Rock – an early Emerald 50 –



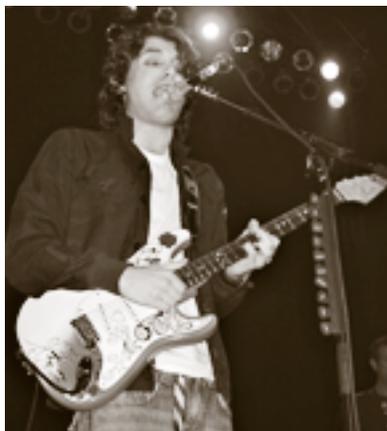
was a formidable tool and it remains one of our all-time favorites among all the amplifiers we have

reviewed in the past six years. As we observed in our first review of Two Rock amps (*TQR*, March 02) each successive model has been tweaked and designed to deliver an increasingly refined and rich spectrum of clean and overdriven tones that can be shaped with traditional tone pots and toggled presets. Like a Dumble, you can hover over each toggle switch and every tone, volume, and gain control, exploring what this setting does versus another, and another... but in the end, it's the fundamental voice of the amp that really matters. Does it encourage and inspire you to make music that taps into all you have to give, or are you boxed into one sound, one voice, and one monophonic emotion? Bells and whistles with a purpose are good if they actually take you somewhere worth visiting, but if you aren't happy with an amp when all its tone controls are set at 12 o'clock, endlessly tweaking them usually won't change your mind (and we apply this test often, right out of the box). The raw character of the Emerald 50 is a great sound, if less sophisticated and harmonically endowed when compared to a Topaz or Custom Reverb, but they're all good, and each model has its fans.



Two Rock amplifiers are also often compared

to Dumbles, and while the founders have spent lots of time consulting with players who own Dumble amps like Steve Kimock and John Mayer, Two Rocks are not really "Dumble knock-offs," although they do share unique features common to both. John Mayer put it this way when comparing the latest Two Rock Custom Reverb Signature with his Dumbles:



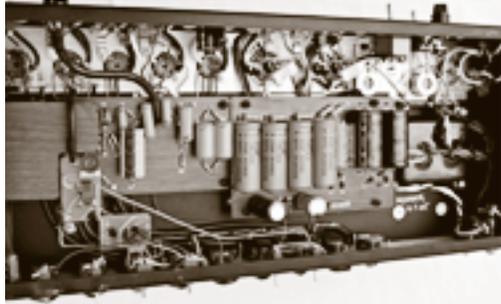
*"Midrange is a healthy part of the tone, but the Two Rock midrange still has a Fender-like bounce to it. It has the midrange that can really send your notes across. I believe there is also a lot of power of suggestion in sound – a placebo effect that takes place in sound, and a lot of that placebo effect has to do with the mood you're in. How 'ya feeling? How are you feeling about the intention of that amp being built? I could give you a Two Rock and put a Dumble next to it and say, 'Play this Two Rock. Now, listen to this Dumble!' and you'll be suggested as to which one sounds the best. It all goes together. The intention, whether you are to be believed in your intention... I don't know whether it's just a coincidence, but the Two Rocks have such a friendliness about them. Where Dumble failed is that it's really not a very colorful amplifier. It's got a few colors in it that are brilliant, but it's not a rainbow. A Dumble is like going to a Sushi bar. You're going to get the best Sushi in town, but it's Sushi – fish and rice, you know? But on stage I don't play just one thing. Plugging into a Two Rock made me re-calibrate what I was listening to in the Dumble. A Two Rock is not a Dumble clone, and that's what I want people to know. I'm not playing a Two Rock because I can't find a Dumble... I have four Dumbles now, and I could emotionally afford to take one out on the road and see it get dinged up, get it recovered and so on. There's a reason it's not on stage, and it speaks to the intention I mentioned before. I don't know what the intention of the Dumble is... it confuses everybody. But playing a Two Rock on stage is like, "I get it." The Two Rock has the directness of the Dumble, but the color of a Fender. So you could buy yourself a Dumble and a Twin Reverb and play them both at the same time, but the Two Rock does that better."*

We agree that the Two Rock's tones are more intensely colored than the Dumble... broader, deeper, fuller, wider, and the higher gain settings produce variable levels of distortion that can be less dark, compressed and linear than the Dumble.



The Two Rock Signature Custom Reverb is a great enabler that

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bounces with a jaunty attitude, while the Dumble is a more compressed, heavier,

laser-beam sound that may even sound a little dated to some. At \$5,500 the Two Rock Signature Custom Reverb is one of the most costly production amps built today, and like the Dumble, we view the Two Rock as a stellar *performance* amp. For those who crave the rare air occupied by Dumbles, it is a versatile and worthy option – just don't call it a "Dumble knock off." Perhaps the greatest endorsement for the Two Rock Signature Custom Reverb is that they can't build them fast enough to meet demand. **To**

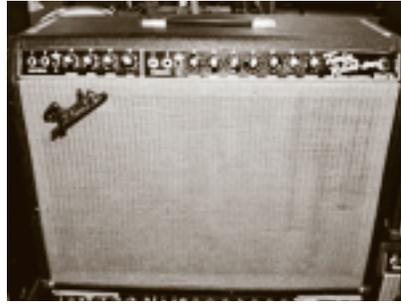
K&M Analog Designs LLC  
707-584-8663, [www.two-rock.com](http://www.two-rock.com)

## the ToneQuest TOP 10

Everyone's list of top ten amps will be different, so let's agree that the very concept of compiling a top ten list broadly applied to all players is destined to be flawed from the start. For example, were we to include the 1959 tweed Bassman, could you relate if you had actually never played through an original '59 Bassman? No, you couldn't, although you might agree that the '59 Bassman is *historically* one of the top ten most important amp designs ever created. But historical importance doesn't necessarily justify a similar ranking based on sound. With this disclaimer in mind, we offer our highly subjective top ten list for your consideration merely as a resource to stimulate your appetite for amplifiers that produce big tone and decent headroom. (We're promoting clean headroom as a means of tightening up your technique and expanding your palette of tones). To avoid becoming mired in a ridiculous controversy, our Top Ten are being presented as a group in which each amp shares equal merit (often for very different reasons, which is why there can be no "best.") Only you can determine what's best for you. We have also omitted favorites like the Ampeg V2/VT40, Vox AC30 and Two Rock since we have recently recommended them in separate articles (like the one you just read).

### 1964-1971 Fender Twin

Yes, it's 70 watts and a load to haul, but what other amplifier really sounds as lush and confident or compliments humbuck-



ing pickups as well as a vintage Twin? Consider a blackface Showman head as well – identical except for the missing reverb. With patience you can score a clean,

non-master volume silverface Twin for \$800-\$1000 and as little as \$600 for a Showman head. Once you've snagged a Twin or Showman, where will you play it? Unless you're touring on big stages, consider building a cinderblock bunker, or deliver your amp to a tech who knows how to modify the circuit for half power and faster distortion at lower volume if that's what you need. It can be done. For clean tones, just leave it alone and enjoy "3" at home, or like Junior Brown, *dime* it, man! We once cut tracks with a Twin on '10' in a bathroom lined with ceramic tile and the tone was not to be believed. Stay tuned for Junior Brown on our cover next month.

### 1948-1975 Fender Deluxe

Hey, wait a minute – you can't lump all the Deluxe models built over the past 50 years in one group! Well, yes we can – it's up to you to determine which era will suit your needs



best. The Deluxe and Deluxe Reverb amps all fill the need for a moderately-powered 1x12 that can surpass the limitations of less powerful 1x10 models offering little if any headroom. Granted, it's an incremental step – even a Deluxe

Reverb running on 6V6's can't produce enough clean tones at stage volume for many players – but miked on a big stage or for small clubs, rehearsals and home jamming, the Deluxe is still hard to beat. The less costly, early TV front Deluxe amps can be tweaked to sound incredibly good as an overdriven blues amp, the narrow panel tweed Deluxe is legendary (and you'll pay dearly for it), the brown '61-'62 Deluxe can be as good or better than everything that preceded them and a screaming deal at \$1500, and the black and silverface Deluxe Reverb amps are simply one of the all-time greats. Biased for 6L6's they can fill a room with beautiful clean tones at adequate volume levels, and the addition of a 50K midrange pot adds some very un-Fendery Hot & Nasty that will have fans of British amps drooling over your rig.

### The Juke 1210

It is an unfortunate fact of life that we guitarists can be guilt-

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