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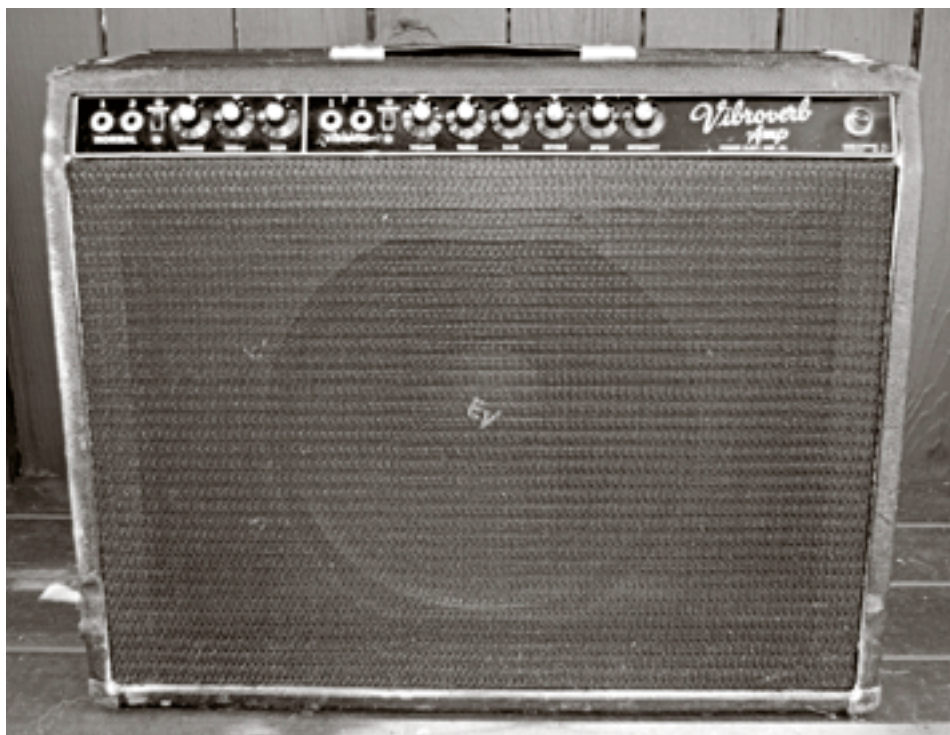
the ToneQuest

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone Report™
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Double Trouble

*"In a closed society where everybody's guilty, the only crime is getting caught.
In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity." – Hunter S. Thompson*

No one has ever complained that the music business was too buttoned up for larcenous freeloaders to operate with alacrity. In fact, such characters are often viewed as mystical savants, and not just in the music world... Success is measured everywhere by accumulated wealth and power; how you get it is more or less irrelevant in a world where the line separating right and wrong has blurred to a dirty little smudge.



The underbelly of the music business can also reveal a lighter side tinged with pathetic hubris of such gross proportions that sane men and women can only laugh in the face of it. But it is arrogant stupidity practiced as religion that ultimately renders the more grounded among us gasping for breath and shrieking with insane laughter. The cult of celebrity has become an embarrassment to our culture – a daily reminder of just how poorly we humans are built for handling it well, and rarely with grace. If you're hanging aluminum foil in hotel room windows, it's time to find another line of work. Surely man was not intended to live in a bubble, isolated from the world for his own safety. In some places, this is called solitary confinement – a fine place to go mad.

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Yet we insist on placing our heroes atop gilded thrones set in quicksand, so it's little wonder when they sink from grace, shamed by scandal, or simply for having the cheek to hang around too long. Nothing caps off a great career like a good overdose, but even this has fallen out of fashion. Our fantasies of imagined greatness ignore the truth; there are no gods walking among us, only moments when it would seem so. Everyone descends from the stage on equal footing, their lives destined to unfold precisely like the rest of us, alternately colored by hope, doubt, joy, despair, indifference, reflection, renewal, trust, betrayal and faith. No one is immune from their humanity – even those reborn.

And so the scene is set. Dead reckoning has brought us to this moment in time, leaning forward now in anticipation of a good and true tale... a story about life, renewal and fate, should you believe in it, and how so much in this world is not as it seems – even in the Quest for tone.

Mr. Valco Rolls the Dice

Southern Indiana is the *better half* of God's Country. Cloaked in hoary hickories, red maples and dogwoods, meandering country roads lead to places where time has frozen like a rusted pump handle. You can leave this place, but persistent roots bond the souls of fortunate sons to its black, loamy earth forever. Witness John Hiatt, John Mellencamp, Steve Wariner, Lonnie Mack... hoosiers whose music reveals an organic weight that could never germinate in concrete. Terry Dobbs lives here still, best known to you as Mr. Valco. His addiction is Valco amplifiers, and he has owned nearly every variant ever made – not because of a supernatural intuition of their worth as appliances, but for the simple reason that for decades, they were all he could afford.



Terry Dobbs, Story, Indiana

Collecting derelict amps with a questionable past requires they be put right, and when putting them right costs more than you paid in the first

place, you learn to do it yourself. Mr. Valco patiently learned the craft of fixing old amps during years of evenings and weekends off from a southern Indiana box factory, and he became better than good at it. Amplifiers of all kinds came his way, and in early 2007 he received a long distance call from the son of a local repair customer, inquiring if he was interested in "pedals." "Well, I might be... whatcha got?" "Oh, just a couple of things... an old Fuzz Face, a couple of Roger Mayer Octavias and a Vox wah. They're pretty old," the son replied. More ques-

tions revealed that the son we'll call "Meth Boy" was living in Austin, Texas. Fated to play out the string, a road trip to Arizona was already in the making for the Valcos. A stop-over in Austin would be a welcome break in the 800 mile drive across Texas, and a rendezvous was thus arranged.

Nudging things forward with an encouraging grin and a keen nose for good cantinas and Texas bullshit was Riverhorse. Having become acquainted with Mr. Valco through the restoration of a National amp, he agreed to meet the Valcos in Austin to provide immoral support, act as a tour guide on 6th Avenue, and cast a long shadow while the deal was going down.



At the appointed date and time, Meth Boy appeared in a Super 8 parking lot with the pedals as described – a heavily abused Vox wah with a Japanese TDK

inductor; two Roger Mayer Octavias, and a modified Dallas-Arbiter Fuzz Face with a card inside from Strings & Things, Memphis, and a strip of rock & roll tape stuck to the base inscribed with "NPN BC109, SRV 4-12-90." As Mr. Valco pondered Meth Boy's curious stash, his concentration cracked when Meth Boy casually asked if he was "into amps..." Standing in the artificial twilight of the parking lot, Valco hesitated as a jolt of adrenaline jacked his pulse into double time. Lighting a Marlboro red, he sucked in a deep drag, letting the smoke float away on his words. "I might be... what is it?" Meth Boy shifted to low gear for traction, muttering, "Oh, it's some kind of *Vibro* amp – pretty big. You want me to go get it?"



Valco stalled, his mind flooded with contra-

dictions as a slurry of chile rellenos *con frijoles* and four Negro Modelos soured his gut. *This ain't smelling right, but I'm here, goddammit... might as well see it through.* Hours passed with Meth Boy's parting promise to "be right back" still ringing in Valco's ears when the car finally turned into the parking lot and Meth Boy slid his shitty Taurus next to the Valco RV. Jammed into the trunk was a pro road case requiring two pairs of hands to pull it upright and out of the trunk. As Meth Boy and Valco set the road case down on the asphalt, the sodium lights high overhead illuminated a bright

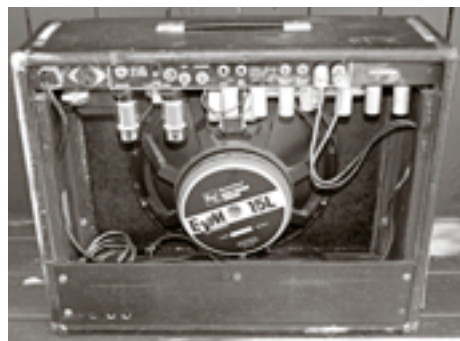
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white spray painted stencil in a mildly threatening script that read like a warning... "STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN & DOUBLE TROUBLE."



Shoving another Marlboro into the corner of his mouth, Valco peered at Meth Boy through the blue-orange flame of his

stainless Zippo. The expression on the kid's face was a cipher... the vacant, yellow stare of a zombie woof. Mechanically moving around the road case, Meth Boy twisted open each hinged clasp to free the top, pulled it off and stepped back into the shadows. Valco stood motionless, dumbly staring at the cheerful script on the black faceplate of the big Fender, beaming at him like a neon sign. *Vibroverb Amp...*



Delayed and badly off schedule from Meth Boy's two hour detour, Valco heaved the Vibroverb out of the lower padded compartment,

tilted the amp forward and peered into the back. A big-ass EV speaker was framed on the top by NOS tubes, an orange stump protruding from the rectifier socket, and an unusually large output transformer hanging directly over the center of the EV's frame. The familiar ritual of looking over a strange new amp had a calming effect on Valco – even one belonging to dead legend. Casually leaning against the RV, Riverhorse hadn't twitched nor uttered a word, yet Valco took comfort in the certain knowledge that his *coyote* remained coiled like a snake. Satisfied that the Vibroverb was what it appeared to be, Valco turned his attention back to Meth Boy. "Where did you get this?" "Well, it was given to an old guy named Benny Rowe, one of the original Austin guitar players. I guess he was a mentor to Stevie, so he gave him all this stuff and then Benny fell on hard times and had to sell it, and he sold it to me." As Valco considered Meth Boy's story, he also sensed that Mrs. Valco's patience with their delayed departure from the Super 8 was reaching critical mass. Too much more of this and there would be a persistent shit hemorrhage dogging him all the way back to Indiana. Valco

motioned Meth Boy closer and popped the question. "What do you want for all of this?" Meth Boy looked at Valco with his vacant, road kill stare and offered a lagniappe... "Well, I also got some personal items... a strap, belt, some jewelry, and a notebook. You can have it all for \$5,000."

Sweating indecision, Valco suddenly felt sick and wasted from the bad juju hovering around Meth Boy like cheap after-



shave. A dozen questions seared his brain, but they wouldn't be answered here. He needed to get back on the road and deal with the consequences later, reasoning he had three days to deadhead it back to Indiana from the Arizona desert – plenty of time to ponder Meth Boy's bizarre story. Valco could at least sort out the hypotheticals on the long drive home.

*I know he's a wolf
said Riding Hood
but Grandma dear
he smells so good...
Burma-Shave*

With a meaningless handshake, Valco and Meth Boy closed the deal, the amp, pedals and 'personal items' were loaded into the RV, and Mrs. Valco finally swung the land yacht westward into the Texas night, \$5,000 poorer for a one night stay at the Super 8. The room, the Tex-Mex and the beers were on Riverhorse.



Not long after Valco returned to Indiana, Riverhorse suggested to Valco that he render unto ToneQuest all that he had acquired from

Meth Boy for an official inspection to be documented in print. A week later, Valco arrived in Atlanta with Mrs. Valco and one of his local jam buddies – a hoosier hard trucker and guitar slinger we'll call "Three More Hours." We arranged to take the gear to Jeff Bakos' Ampworks and studio for a visual and sonic

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probe. Mr. Valco had already digested the modifications made to the Vibroverb – Jeff would simply provide a solid second opinion. Riverhorse flew in from Houston to observe with only one request... “I have to go to the Clermont.” Not a request, really, but a firm declaration, as if he had said, “I have to go to the bathroom.” Of course, the subject of the *true* status of the Stevie gear was also discussed at length, and Valco would deal with that soon enough.



Before we launch into a review of Stevie's Vibroverb (we were told that as many as five once existed), understand that our friendship with Stevie's amp tech, the late César Diaz, provided us with the opportunity to discuss the modifications César made to his amps and effects pedals at length, and often. See the August 2000 issue of TQR for our cover story on Diaz.

Fender's successful development of the handwired, blackface reissue Vibroverb was done in close consultation with César, and he was quite proud of having personally shaped Stevie's



tone. His strategy was based on making Stevie's pedals more reliable – especially the Fuzz Faces that operated with notoriously heat-sensitive germanium transistors, and fortifying the amps to

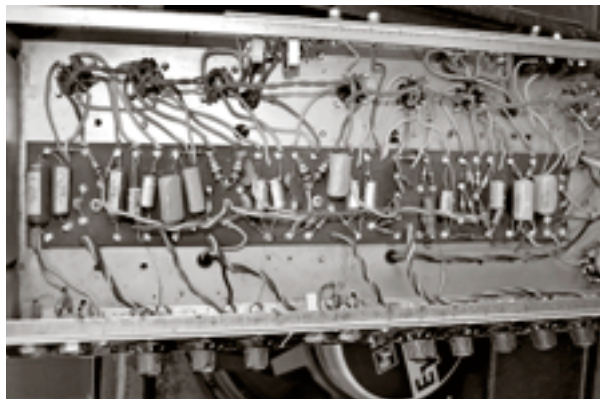
develop an extraordinarily clean and punchy tone with virtually none of the sag and squishy low end that stock tube rectifiers, smallish Fender output transformers and '60s speakers produced. There was also some experimentation with speakers – first JBL D130s – and



when these proved to be incapable of withstanding Stevie's withering volume and pick attack, they switched to ElectroVoice EVM-15L's – notably robust, clean and capable of handling high power and the transient spikes created with a .058 gauge low-tuned E string popped with two fingers through an amp and effects.

Modifications

Here's the scoop on the significant changes César made to Stevie's '64 Vibroverb...



The original blue Sprague caps in the Vibroverb's tone section were changed in Channel Two to Orange Drops. César also replaced the caps in the reverb return and the three main caps in the phase inverter to Orange Drops, changing the tone of the amp drastically with increased gain, highs, lows, and midrange – a bigger sound overall from the stock circuit. The 1 meg resistors in the phase inverter circuit were changed to a later '70s value that also gave the amp more clean headroom. César kept many of the blue Sprague caps in the tone section, which made the amp sound tighter. The bypass caps on both channels were changed to 33 mfd, adding a very small amount of bass to the Normal channel, but with very little effect on the Vibrato channel. The original grid resistors were changed to 2 watt carbon comps to make the amp more stable, and he also installed 1 watt plate load resistors on Channel Two and in the reverb return for better reliability. Knowing César, these may have been pulled from a newer '70s Fender amp. The stock bright cap was left intact, as well as the midrange resistor. The Reverb In and Out jacks were changed from RCA's to more durable 1/4 inch jacks.

The replaced output transformer is a larger 2 ohm from a Concert or Super Reverb that had to be moved to the center of the chassis to fit over the speaker frame, but the 15" EV speaker is an 8 ohm, producing a huge impedance mismatch – almost a dead short that works the power tubes much harder. It made the amp sound cleaner, and altered the tone. Up

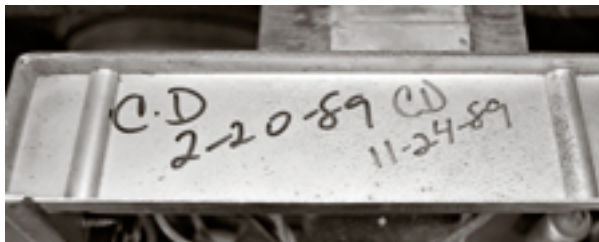


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close, the Vibroverb sounded brash and tight, and the tone seemed to improve significantly from greater distances as the sound waves were dispersed in the air. This amp was set up to be played wide open, the tone was very trebly, and with César's mods, super-clean with maximum headroom.

The Vibroverb was also set up for a Groove Tubes plug-in solid state rectifier with 220 mfd filter caps in place of the normal 70 mfd caps, increasing the bass response and making the amp sound cleaner still. César was trying to make the amp come up clean and hot. We found a Mesa Boogie-labeled Siemens 12AT7 in the phase inverter, again, for the cleanest sound, excellent Chinese 12AX7's labeled Mesa Boogie from the late '80s, and a Tungstram – actually an early Yugoslavian EI from the '80s. Power tubes were American Philips 6L6s. The original grill cloth and baffle-board were replaced when the EV was installed, and the original AA764 tube chart is incorrect – Stevie's '64 Vibroverb is actually an AB764.

Given the various service dates César had written on the end of the Vibroverb chassis, we know this amp was being used between February 20, 1989 and March 18, 1990, placing it in



the studio during the final *In Step* sessions. The irony lurking within Stevie's Vibroverb is that for the average club player, this amp would be virtually useless. It's too loud, completely unforgiving in the style of a powerful Showman, and totally void of subtlety or nuanced finesse. The EV speaker is a fucking sledgehammer in this amp, and the entire package was perfectly suited for Stevie's heavy-handed style and the



large venues he played. With maximum headroom and zero sag, the Vibroverb could not only withstand Stevie's blistering attack, but the additional gain created with the Fuzz Face, a Tube Screamer or the Octavia. Stevie's rig was a customized house on fire, operating at extreme limits where the difference between spellbinding tone and an ugly meltdown



was paper thin. According to César, he was often required to change hot Fuzz Faces for cold ones kept in a refrigerator backstage, while throwing amps on standby between songs to change power tubes with oven mitts. The Vibroverb was modified to function as a hot-rodged tool for a hell hot guitar player, but you wouldn't want to play it at a typical bar gig any more than you'd drive a methanol dragster to a funeral. Wrong tool for the job.

César Diaz could be immensely generous with his time, but he could also be ruthlessly short with the endless stream of Stevie Ray Wannabes asking him how to cop "Stevie's tone." As both a guitar player, amp builder and tech, he knew instinctively that the power of Stevie's playing came from the man far more than the gear. César's job was to build and



maintain the tools Stevie needed to perform every night and sound his best. Buying the 'right' Tube Screamer, Stratocaster, Vibroverb, etc. wasn't gonna get you there. In fact, one of César's favorite responses to the Stevie questions was, "Well, if you were going to be as great as Stevie, you would have done it by now." Conversation over.



Our hands-on experience with the Vibroverb once again exposed the not-so-subtle promises lurking within the

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marketing messages that are often used to sell you gear. Without exception, they are bogus to the core. Gladly feed your fantasies – we all have them – but don't swallow anyone's implied claim that if you buy what they're selling, you too can sound like someone other than you. We played Stevie's amp, and nobody in the room sounded remotely like him. The Quest for Tone is all about finding *your* tone – one (or many) that can help you connect with the muse within. That singular idea is all these pages have ever been about, or ever will.

The Real Story



Of course, you're wondering what has happened to the purloined stash rescued from Meth Boy... None of us were inclined to swallow the story about Benny Rowe having been given Stevie's gear, although Benny Rowe *does* exist, or did. We found a link to a web site celebrating the early years of '60s psychedelic Austin rock in which

Rowe was apparently a founding member, but we never located Rowe himself. After drilling a few dry holes, Mr. Valco was finally able to contact Jimmie Vaughan, and he learned through an Austin police detective that Meth Boy and an accomplice had allegedly broken into the storage



facility where Jimmie kept gear belonging to both he and Stevie – *not once, but twice*. "Broken into" may also be inaccurate, as a security guard at the storage facility is suspected of being involved. And this wasn't the first time Stevie's gear had been ripped off... René Martinez recalled an instance when someone aware of the location of Stevie's storage space posed as a crew member and drove off with the con-

tents, while Tommy Shannon told us that a truck full of gear was once stolen. In addition to the booty sold to Mr. Valco, miscellaneous guitars, memorabilia and other pieces are reportedly missing, some of which had been offered to a Dallas auction company before the police apprehended Meth Boy and his pal on theft and related charges. As of this writing, the guitars have not been recovered, nor have they been described in detail publically in an effort to recover them. As for the return of the gear bought by Mr. Valco, the ball is now in Jimmie Vaughan's court to arrange shipment back to Austin from Indiana. No offer of compensation has been made or requested.



Finally, we must mention the notebook – one of the "personal items" found with Stevie's amp and pedals. On the surface it appears to be an ordinary spiral-bound tablet, but inside were pages filled with striking evidence of Stevie Ray Vaughan's dramatic recovery from addiction. A diary of sorts, the notebook was filled with handwritten song lyrics, notes from crew and management meetings,

detailed action plans for streamlining the SRV organization, diagrams of stage setups, lists of equipment to be acquired or repaired, and a very personal outline of Stevie's commitment to maintaining his physical and mental health. He had also sketched out plans for "2-coil pickup placement with stereo application possibilities" involving the pros and cons of "single or double pole (separate for each string) pickups connected in series, and a "continuous string cartridge for SRV guitar" that would hold replacement strings coiled on six spring-loaded wheels inside a cylindrical cartridge. It was unclear how this would be mounted, but the idea was to have immediate access to replacement strings that could be quickly pulled through the trem block and guitar body and restrung in seconds.

The lyrics found in the notebook reflected Stevie's profound appreciation for each day granted to him as he now lived his life in a state of grace and serenity. One song in particular, "Count Your Blessings" is clear enough in its intention. While some may view Stevie Ray Vaughan's life as having been cut short, it is bitterly ironic that his spiritual rebirth occurred just in time for his passing. As César Diaz wryly observed, "Stevie was sanctified." God bless them both. **To**



Valco Revisited



We first christened Terry Dobbs 'Mr. Valco' in the April 2002 issue of TQR. Montana guitar builder Larry Pogreba had pointed us to Terry as an experienced hand in restoring Valco amps, and as usual, Larry was right. Since then, Terry has continued to collect, repair and restore vintage Valcos while

their value and collectible status has steadily climbed. Since we published our first article in 2002, prices for original Valco amps in good condition have doubled or more, while certain trolls with extraordinarily vivid fantasies completely lose their minds in an attempt to ascend the Stairway to Heaven... A Supro 1624T hawked on eBay as being identical to THE Led Zeppelin amp just sold for a record \$4,538, and the Supro Thunderbolt 1x15 (formerly "the Led Zeppelin amp" until that ruse was exposed) now sells for over \$1,000. Yet many of the smaller amps made by Valco can still be acquired for under \$500. Terry Dobbs provided us with four Valco amps to consider, and Greg Talley added a real sleeper from his collection – a minty clean late '40s National Deluxe.



The Valco company was founded in Chicago by the three owners of the Dobro-National company – Louis Dopyera, Victor Smith and Al Frost. From

the mid '40s until 1967, Valco built amplifiers under its own name and for many other companies. National amps were the top of the line, and other brands included Oahu, McKinney, Gretsch, Airline, and Valco's own Supro brand. One of Terry Dobb's favorite Valco models remains the little Supreme, but his collection runs the gamut, from dozens of small amps originally used for lapsteel, to bigger Nationals, Airlines and Supros.

Most of our past reviews of Valco amps have focused on Supro models, including the 1x15 Thunderbolt, 2x12 T88, and



ing, old-school Jimmy Reed clean tones, and at higher volume... raw distortion and sustain with a blustery attitude as contagious as it is unsophisticated. It may not become your everyday tone, but for those that enjoy keeping a few sleepers around that can throw down a memorable departure from the ordinary, the bigger, dual 6L6 Supros rock.

Buying a stairway to nowhere...



Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is indeed the amp Page used on *Led Zeppelin I* and later recordings of "Since I've Been Loving You" and the "Stairway" anthem, the R&R Hall of Fame seems to believe so. And who might have told them? Well, this



any time soon, with it or without it. Audley Freed and Peter Stroud are capable of getting as close as anyone, *Supro not required*. When it comes to the Page Supro thing, may we please just Ramble On? We'll all be better off when private sellers and manufacturers stop trading on the mythical fantasy that the essence of Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, The Voodoo Child, Duane Allman or anyone else is conveniently available for a price in a pedal, a guitar, an amp or a pickup.

Post War Tone

Three of the Valco amps we received were similar and among the most powerful for their time – a late Valco McKinney 1x12, a similar 1x12 National, and Greg Talley's Deluxe – surely the flagship of the National line with its supper club

1x15 1696T. Even we can't play 'em all, but these three Supros in particular were classic Valco – midrangey and bold with haunt-

As for the insanity surrounding the mystical 'Led Zeppelin' Supro, just pick a story – there are plenty to choose from. Whether the hacked Supro 1690T Coronado we shot at the

is all moot... You still won't have Page's Telecaster, and nobody is going to be channeling vintage Jimmy Page

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friendly, ornate wood veneer cabinet. Hey, maybe T-Bone Walker played it... What's *that* worth? All three of these amps date to the late '40s/early '50s and were originally equipped with field coil 12" Jensen or Rola speakers, 6L6 output tubes, 5V4 rectifiers and

octal preamp tubes, including 6SC7s, 6SN7s and 6SJ7s. Multiple instrument inputs and a microphone input were common in these early amps, and they were often used simultaneously. The instrument inputs are typically weak and clean sounding. By modern standards, these amps don't develop much power – around 10-12 watts – and like many '50s Gibson amps, it's the microphone channel and its intense distortion that



gives blues guitar and harp players the big bamboo – an odd and happy accident that was

unthinkable at the time these amps were built. Among the three big Valco amps sharing similar designs, Greg Talley's Deluxe – the oldest of the three – developed the fattest, thickest and loudest raunch through the mic channel – one that would easily compete with the \$4,000 *El Led Supro*, we think. Hearing such gonzo tones gushing from an amp that looks as if it belongs in a museum is bizarre, to say the least, but all of these old big-band amps can readily crank heavy distortion in the mic channel. Played clean, get out your P90 archtop, which is what the designers surely had in mind from the very beginning. For recording and relatively low volume gigs, these big Valco toasters can be made very stable and toneful, and



they create a memorable visual statement. Just keep in mind that they can basically do three tricks – clean, low-volume chukka-chukka, moderate grease at modest volumes, and thoroughly rippin' distortion that will leave you wondering, "Where the fuzz at?"

Airline 8503-S



Terry's Montgomery Ward Airline 8503-S is a 1x12 burner equipped with a duet of rare 6973 output tubes commonly

found in Seeburg jukebox amps (substituted with 6C35s), 5Y3 rectifier and three 12AX7 preamp tubes. The Airline churns around 10 watts and clean headroom disappears once the volume on either channel passes '3'. Like many Supro amps with tremolo, the Airline features two channels with Bright and Normal inputs, separate volume and tone controls, and tremolo speed and intensity controls. The Bright inputs sound thin and sharp, although you can get some nice contrasts with humbucking pickups; for single coils, the Normal inputs are all biscuits and gravy. Like most Valcos, what you get is mildly busted up, bluesy tones, to heavy distortion with a strong midrange presence, but none of the chimy character associated with smaller British amps. Valcos are neither subtle or particularly sweet and cuddly things, but they do love to bark and piss on yer leg. As Marwan at the Avondale Citgo station cheerfully likes to say about rising gas prices, "Don't worry. You'll get used to it."

Supro Coronado 1690T



Terry also provided us with an example of the modified Supro belonging to Jimmy Page on display at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and pictured here. Note the BIG ASS 220V-115V stepdown transformer to the left of the chassis, Mullard GZ34 rectifier tube in place

of the stock 5V4, and replacement Oxford Alnico speaker common to early '60s Fender amps.

Terry's own Supro Coronado cabinet had been recovered in tweed – otherwise, it is a stock 1690T with dual 6L6s, 5V4 rectifier, three 12AX7s and two Oxford 10" speakers. The Page amp was modified with a replaced baffleboard for the 12" speaker, and the operating voltages would have been increased by around 20% with the use of the GZ34 rectifier, according to Terry.

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Like the Airline 8503, the Coronado features two channels with separate volume and tone controls, Supro's "organ tone" tremolo,

and the Coronado was rated at 24 watts. The Oxford 10s aren't our favorites – this amp (or yours) would sound even more impressive with a pair of Eminence Ramrods – but we were able to appreciate the Coronado's considerable abilities nonetheless. This is one of the punchier Supro models, and true to form, clean head room is nil. Cranked, it does a very nice job of carrying a tune with a smooth overdriven tone that



is neither too soft and flaccid, aggressive or sharp – just right

for hard rockin' tones requiring good string definition in chords, heavy double bass lines, and soaring leads. Terry recently sold a clean Coronado for \$1,600, and he never once mentioned that which shall not be mentioned... **TQ**



Buyer's Guide to Valco Amps

We asked Mr. Valco to run down a few of his favorite amps, while describing the usual maintenance issues you should anticipate when buying a Valco that has escaped the attention of a good tech. Many old Valco amps have been sitting in closets, barns, attics and damp, dark basements for decades...

TQR: What are some of the most desirable Valco amps, and what makes them so?

Valco made many different amps over a period of many years, and the circuits continued to evolve as time went on, so there are a lot of cool amps to consider. If you also include the National Dobro Corp. amps made before the Valco Manufacturing Co. was formed after WWII, the list would certainly be a long one, but here is an overview of five that represent a cross section of my favorite lower and higher powered amps:

Supro 1605 reverb amp



Made in the early 1960s, the 1605 is a 1x10 combo amp originally shipped with a Jensen C10R, 12AX7, 6DR7, 6EU7, two 6973 output tubes, and a 5U4 rectifier.

Controls include Volume, Tone, and a Reverb on/off intensity switch. This is a rare amp, and an identical Gretsch Electromatic version also exists. The 1605 is very loud for its size. In fact, it has the same power amp chassis as the early Gretsch 6162 amp with 2-10" speakers, and produces a full, rich tone with *major* gain and overdrive. The reverb is not all that great sounding – probably a notch above the old Danelectro amps – but the intensity control circuit has a cool and probably unintended characteristic. As you turn the reverb control down, the gain in the amp goes up, and in effect the intensity control can be used as a master overdrive control, dialing in the amount of gain you like. This is because the circuit takes some of the dry signal off the volume control to drive the reverb circuit. The reverb sounds OK if you just blend it in enough to hear it, but fine tuning the intensity control is the key and pushes an already great sounding amp over the top. The 1605 is a versatile and great sounding little amp – one of the best sounding Valco amps I've ever owned.

1953 National Tweed Amp



There is no model number on this amp, and it is very rare and progressive for its time. I'm sure it was the top of the Valco line in 1953 – a huge tweed amp with

two Jensen P12Ps, two 6SJ7 pre amp tubes, two 6SN7s, two 6L6s, a 5V4 rectifier, and a 6SL7 tube was used for the *active* treble and bass circuits. The active tone circuits in this National dedicate a triode from each half of the 6SL7 to amplify the treble and bass frequencies, rather than employing the passive cut circuit commonly found in most guitar amps. The control panel is a cool light-up etched in plexiglass and the chrome handle is very large. This is such a high gain amp that tube selection is critical to avoid any problems with microphonics. The same chassis was also used in another National amp from the late '50s that featured a single Jensen P12N. These are the only two Valco amps I have ever seen built with active tone circuits – a rarity in any guitar amp.

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National Glenwood model 90



Dating to the early '60s, the Model 90 is equipped with two Jensen C12PS speakers, dual 6L6s, a 5U4 rectifier, a single 12AU7, three 6EU7s and a 12AX7. This is a

two channel amp with tremolo and reverb, and a 3-way switch for Hi Bass, Lo Bass and Guitar for each input. The



Model 90 is another rare Valco – fine and bluesy. It features a very nice transformer-driven large pan reverb, rich, deep tremolo, and 25 to 30 watts of power – great for medium size clubs.

Boost pedals work well with this amp and it is well suited for a variety of styles of music.

Supro 1600R Supreme



The 1600 is an early '60s model originally equipped with a single Jensen C10R, dual 12AX7s, two 6973s, a 5Y3 rectifier, and volume and tone controls for two

'regular' and one 'treble' input. There were many versions of the Supreme amp built over the years, starting with the 6J7 preamp tube model with a field coil Rola 10 and single volume control. Later models switched to the 6SQ7 preamp tube and three inputs with a volume and tone control. A transitional amp followed in the mid '50s featuring a combination of 9-pin miniature and octal preamp tubes, then the Supro 1600, 1600B, 1600R, 1600S, and the 6400 followed. Starting with the 1600 series, the Supreme changed from 6V6 to 6973 output tubes, and this version is a surprisingly loud little tone monster with signature 6973 output tube crunch. For back room jamming, recording or practice, it is definitely an amp worth finding.

Montgomery Ward Airline Model 62-GVC 9037A

This is one of Valco's most powerful guitar amps, and also one of the coolest and funkiest they ever built. Mine was manufac-



tured in 1966, and it represents one of the very last models Valco made that still included tube rectification. It originally came with four 6L6s, two 5U4s, five 12AX7s

and a 6DR7 reverb driver tube. Other features included two Jensen C12PS speakers, volume and tone controls for both channels, three inputs per channel (one treble and two regular),



reverb intensity, and tremolo speed and intensity controls. This is a serious guitar amp with plenty of vol-

ume, tone, and headroom for most any venue. It also has a very good sounding tremolo effect and nice, deep reverb. With its huge power transformer and the two extra-beefy output transformers, this model seriously competes with the biggest amps of its time. Although the funky woodgrain covering looks a little cheesy, the swirly grill more than makes up for it. For an amp made in 1966, the 9037A ushered in the psychedelic era ahead of its time. In my opinion, it represents the pinnacle of the evolution in Valco circuits.

TQR: For someone considering a Valco amp, what are the most important factors to consider, ranked by their importance?

Originality of the circuit is important, especially on the later model Valcos from the late '50s through the '60s. Some of these amps are fairly complex, and any misguided repairs can negatively affect tone and be expensive to correct.

Look carefully at the transformers, chassis and metal parts of the amp; they often provide clues to how it was stored. If you see a lot of rust on metal components, mold or mildew on the cabinet or output transformer, you can assume the amp has been kept in



a moist or humid environment that could affect the service life of critical components. Check the cabinet for cracks and loose joints. Some early Valco amps used thin 3/8" plywood for cabinet material and some have held up better than others.

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Although there are a lot of very good aftermarket transformers available today, original transformers are always preferable. For collectors, cosmetic condition and the presence of original components and unrecoiled speakers will significantly affect value. For players simply looking for a great sounding amp, original speakers (and to a degree, transformers) need not be a make or break deal. Mercury Magnetics makes some replacement transformers for Valco amps now, and there is a wide range of excellent replacement speakers available.

Don't worry too much if an old Valco hums, the volume seems low, or the tremolo isn't working. These are usually relatively easy fixes that you may leverage for a lower price.



Many of the 1940s and early '50s amps used 4 ohm speakers, including the early

Supreme amps, Comet and Spectators. Most had the output transformer mounted on the speaker frame with rivets. I have come across a lot of these amps where the speaker and output transformer have both been replaced using 8 ohm speakers and cheap, universal output transformers. This really degrades the volume and tone of the amp, and the difference between an amp operating to spec and one running on an 8 ohm speaker with the wrong transformer is night and day.

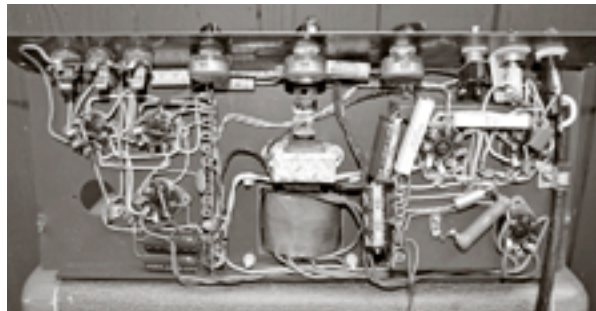
TQR: Valco amps used many obsolete octal tubes. Are they still available as new old stock or current production, and can certain tubes be substituted with others with good results (or even an improvement in tone?)

There are current production octal preamp tubes being made now in Russia and China. I really don't recommend them except as a last resort. You can still get most any NOS tube you need from Antique Electronic Supply, Angela Instruments, and KCA NOS Tubes. 6J7 metal tubes used in the early Supreme amps can be microphonic – sometimes you may need to try a handful to find a really good one. They are still fairly cheap and you can also use a metal 6K7 as a substitute with little change in tone or gain. The 6SJ7 can be replaced with a 6SK7 in a pinch, as well. Valco used the 6X5 rectifier in some amps, and the 6AX5 is a good substitute, if not an upgrade. The hardest tube to find as an NOS replacement is the 9-pin 6973 output tube. They are still available, but prices are very high. There is an overseas version available, but it is sonically not up to spec with the NOS versions. The best bet is to have a good tech run a jumper wire

between pins 1 and 8 on the 6973 tube sockets and then you can use either the 6973 or 6CZ5. The 6CZ5 is still priced reasonably – about \$10 each. Although the 6CZ5 is rated at a maximum voltage of 350 volts as opposed to the 6973 at 440 volts, it is a good replacement in the lower-voltage circuits Valco commonly used. I have found them to be reliable and sound every bit as good as the 6973.

TQR: Can you describe what you do when restoring an old, neglected amp as part of your service to make it sound its best and operate reliably?

I will open it up and inspect the amp looking for any obvious problems, check to see if the correct fuse is installed,



and if the circuit is intact and appears stock. I test the tubes, put the correct speaker load on the amp and bring it up on a variac. I take voltage readings in the power supply and other critical areas and test to find if any coupling caps are leaking DC voltage. Then I verify that all the resistors are within tolerance and not burned or cracked, and check all ground connections. A normal servicing will include replacing filter caps, cathode bypass caps, out-of-spec resistors, leaky coupling caps, cleaning, retensioning tube sockets, and installing a 3-prong AC cord and removing the "death cap" circuitry for safety. I also verify that all grounds are properly established, jacks and pots are tight and cleaned, transformers are tight and secure, circuit wires are routed correctly, and check for cold solder joints. I also use vintage correct parts where ever possible. Once the circuit is serviced, I fire it up, check the voltages again and plug in a guitar and play the amp, checking the speaker and all amp functions. Sometimes I will put the amp on a scope if I feel there are any oscillation problems. When properly serviced, the amp should be nice and quiet with good volume and tone, all the controls should operate correctly and smoothly, and short of an original transformer or speaker blowing, it should stay that way for years.

TQR: If you could own and play only one Valco amp, what would it be?

That's a tough call to make, since I have way too many amps already and too many favorites, but if I had to choose one, it would be the Supro 1605 Reverb, hands down.

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TQR: What would you recommend for a novice Valco collector as a start?

Valcos from the late '50s typically require less servicing than earlier amps, and often still sound great even in original condition



with no maintenance having been performed. This is because

Valco stopped using wax-dipped paper coupling caps that have a very high leakage rate and began using ceramic disc caps that seldom if ever fail. The lower voltage circuits Valco typically designed place way less wear and tear on the old filter caps. Most later model Valco amps have a unique, signature voice that separates them from other amps. If you can find a later model 1606, Supreme, Spectator or Comet amp for a decent price, you'll get the general idea of what Valco tone is all about. Avoid the 1611S Bantam model unless you like amps with no power transformer and the potential to shock the crap out of you, or worse. Any Valco in decent shape is worth considering, as long as the price is reasonable and the seller doesn't mentioned the name "Jimmy." **To**

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ToneQuest

CP Thornton Guitars



Successfully building custom electric guitars is one of the most daunting challenges imaginable. Most guitarists are notoriously conservative and quite finicky about odd or unique headstock and body shapes, yet the independent small builder must deviate from familiar, classic designs to avoid being tagged as a mere knock-off artist.

Building guitars in small batches using premium materials is also expensive and time consuming, and the cost must be passed on to each customer if

the builder is to survive. There is a direct cost related to every physical component of a guitar, of course, but how an instrument is conceived, assembled and finished involves another set of decisions that may not be so readily apparent to the player... When it comes to features of construction and fine detail, each builder decides what is worth doing based on their vision of what a fine guitar should be. The 'rules' are completely arbitrary, because in reality, there are no rules.



Jean, Richard, Chuck

We concluded long ago that there are essentially two types of entities that build guitars... those that build instruments to sell because it is their business to make and sell instru-

ments, and those that build instruments because they are called to do so. Such people will find a way to build because the thought of doing anything else is unthinkable, even when the simplest mathematical calculations indicate otherwise. It is no coincidence that these same people often find ways to improve on the original designs of the classic forms in guitar making. Just remember that while the obvious image of one that is 'called' to build guitars is the solo craftsman working in a small shop, there are also plenty of people that have been 'called' to build guitars working at Fender and Gibson. In fact, these companies and others have long provided invaluable training for builders like Jay Black, John Suhr, Tom Anderson, Fred Stuart, Vince Cunetto and many more.

Chuck Thornton has also served his share of apprenticeships doing repairs, and building acoustic guitars and even violins and cellos. Viewed against the landscape created by other independent builders, his work is extraordinary in concept and execution. But most important, while Thornton's guitars are quite unique and built to an extremely high standard, they are also familiar enough to be intriguing to even the stodgy traditionalist. Enjoy...

TQR: How did you first become involved with building and repairing guitars?

I grew up listening to my mother play country western and old cowboy songs (and sing). I fell in love with the guitar at eight years old. I started playing in churches when I was 15 and clubs at 20.

In 1977, I moved to LA for a performer's workshop and studied guitar at McCabe's Music. Then, in 1981, I attended Berklee College of Music in Boston for one year. I made

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grew up on a farm, I raised my hand. I was the only person in the seminar who did. He said, "Go back to it. The odds against any of you making it as a musician are astronomical."

It took me until 1985, but I finally realized that I was probably a better bass player than a guitar player, and now I needed a bass. I couldn't afford the bass I wanted, so I built one. I purchased an old Fender Precision neck and built the body. It looked like crap but it played great. This was when I realized that this was the area of the guitar business that came naturally to me. I just started building instruments and have never stopped.

TQR: And how did your forays into building progress?

The first eight bases I built had bolt-on necks, purchased from Warmouth. One day, my father said, "Why don't you build the neck, too?" The thought of it at the time was "Oooooohhh... fretwork... scary!" But, I guess it's like everything else – it's just scary until you know how to do it. So, I built a neck, purchased a truss-rod from Warmouth and a pre-slotted, pre-radiused, fingerboard. Now I needed to learn how to do fretwork, so I called Dana Bourgeois, and he said "Come on down to my shop. Pay me to do the fret job and I'll show you how I did it."

I thought that the Alembic was the quintessential bass guitar. It taught me the virtue of through-neck instruments, which were fairly new to the scene at that time. But, even then, I never copied anybody. I always created my own designs. I've never been afraid to step away from tradition. I believe that it's important to work "from the school of" than to copy anybody else's designs.

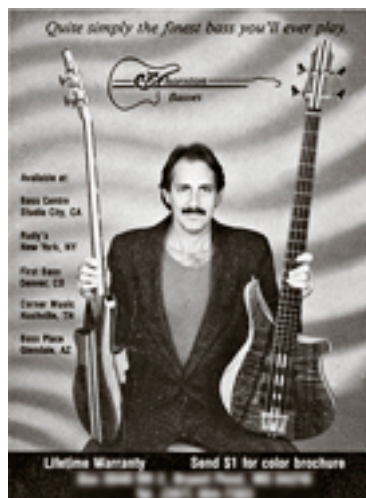
In 1985, after I built the first bass, I kept building them because I loved doing it. As I finished one, someone would say "I want that" and I would sell it for what the parts cost me and build another. My first lesson in what not to do – the first through-neck bass I built was fretless. I found out after I built it that having no frets changed the geometry. I had to

good grades when I was at Berklee, but the most important thing I learned was that music didn't flow from me easily. I had to work very hard at it. This was my realization that I was never going to be a great musician. Pat Metheny came in for a guitar workshop, and the first thing he said was, "How many of you have ever driven a truck?" Because I

make a pocket in the body and sink the bridge into it to get the action right.

The first few through-neck basses were sold for what it cost me to make them, and after a while, I started making a few dollars, and I mean a *few* dollars.

From '85 through '93, I built basses and guitars during the day and played gigs at night. I would even set the basses up and take them out on gigs before finishing them to make sure that they didn't have any bugs to work out. If there were no problems, I would take them apart, finish them and sell them.



In '91 and '92, I went to NAMM and in '92 I had an ad in Bass Player Magazine. In October of '92, I got a call from Dana Bourgeois, who had followed my progression. He had financing to start his own guitar business and asked if I would be interested in being the fret and set up man for the company. I stopped gigging and went to work

for Dana. Along with working for Dana 40 hours a week, I started picking up local repairs, fret jobs and setups. When you've done a lot of repairs, you learn the weak points in the various designs and what you don't want to do when you design instruments for yourself. Some of the guitars that I would repair were brand new instruments that wouldn't play. The neck would rise where it met the body and the strings would fret out from the 12th fret on. Headstocks would break off from minor falls, and I couldn't believe how easily they broke. I was amazed by how many instruments would come in for 'repair' because the intonation was off. I'd look at it, loosen the strings, turn the bridge around, and it was intonated. It was experiences like these that helped me design the instruments I build today.

In '96 I attended an Artisan's Festival at Thomas Point Beach here in Maine. Jon Cooper (the violin-maker) was there and saw my work. He said, "How would you like to come to work for me and learn how to build violins and cellos?" Talk about a fish out of water! This was a world I knew nothing about, but it expanded my building experience from solid-body through-neck basses and guitars to a world of carving billets of wood to make them breathe. If you build guitars and ever have the opportunity to work for a violin maker, I highly recommend it. But, prepare to be humbled.

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I worked for Jon from '96 to 2000, and during that time I built my first six or seven thinline archtop guitars. Then, I ran into Dana at a restaurant one day, and he told me of his new venture with Pantheon Guitars. He wanted to know if I was interested in coming back to work for this new company. I went back to work for Dana's new acoustic guitar company as shop foreman, setup, frets, and in-house repairs, where I also learned from and worked with other great luthiers like John Slobod, Mike Onofrio, Richard Shapiro, and of course, Dana Bourgeois.

In April 2003, I was talking with a local businessman, John Hayden. He said that if I could design a marketable instrument, he could come up with the money to start the business. So, I went to work for almost the next year and a half, and every moment of spare time was spent drawing upon the knowledge I had gained as a through-neck solidbody builder, the knowledge I had gotten from Dana on acoustic guitars, the knowledge I had gained from working for Jon making violins, and from what I had learned from doing repairs. When I finished the design we hired Joe Monbleu and he and I went to work teaching the CNC how to make my parts. We opened the doors of CP Thornton Guitars in June 2004.



From June through December of 2004, I designed and built the shop, put up the spraybooth, and built the first batch of guitars. I began selling guitars basically by word of mouth, because I didn't have a significant ad bud-

get. A friend of mine and of CP Thornton Guitars made a beautiful website as a favor for me, but since he was doing it in his spare time, he wasn't able to expand it to really show off the guitars. Thank you Marty!

I think I build a beautiful, commercially viable and extremely playable instrument, but that and \$1.50 will buy me a cup of coffee. In March of 2006, a dear friend and co-worker from the Dana Bourgeois years, Richard Shapiro, who has more talent than one should be allowed to have, said, "I can help this company." He came into the company, which was almost broke, and started using his wizardry as a photographer and his computer skills to expand the website.

Literally, almost overnight, with Richard's work on the photography and the website, we started selling guitars. People liked what they played, they liked what they saw, and the word started spreading. I can't thank my clients enough for their posts to Harmony Central and The Gear Page. Their

kind words, their appreciation of the guitars, and of course their hard-earned money to purchase the guitars, took us from being almost broke to being a viable company in nine months.

In April of 2006, Richard said, "You've got to develop another model." So, back to the drawing board I went. After a couple of months of trying to think about it, I woke up one morning with a guitar design in my head, only this time it was more of the "school of Strat." Once again, I approached it from a design angle of what could be improved on. And just like the thinline archtops, I tried to approach it with a fresh look and with a conscious effort not to copy another man's work. A year later, the Fusion was born!

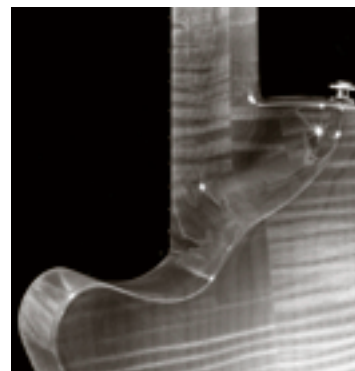
TQR: What are some of the shortcomings in typical production guitars that you set out to eliminate or improve on?



I felt that the through-neck design was the best for stability, sustain and overall quality of the instrument. The one down side that I saw to a semi-hollow through-neck instru-

ment was that if it fell off the stand and the headstock broke, it would compromise the whole guitar. So, I went to work on the design of the relation of headstock to neck. I knew that in architecture a radius was used for strength, and in the repairs I had done I had seen headstocks break off from forward falls and from backward falls. So, I knew that I had to have opposing radiuses to strengthen the headstock-to-neck relationship so that it would withstand a fall in either direction. I guess the US government felt the same way, because they gave me a patent on it.

I know there are those who say that laminated tops and backs on semi-hollow instruments have their own attributes, but after working with a violinmaker, to me it felt like a compro-



mise and my heart just kept telling me that, yes, it would be costly, but the instrument would have more life if carved from solid billets of wood. Also, I know that most guitars had necks made from single pieces of wood, but I knew that quarter-sawn necks made from

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two pieces would be inherently more stable. And, because of the neck-through design for this instrument, I never see the infamous “ski-jump” where the neck meets the body on these guitars.

Another area of design that was important to me was not having a big heel in the way to obstruct playing in the upper registers. That seemed to be an engineering feat in itself, but I think it’s pleasant to look at and very effective. This design, along with the shape of my body and the shape of my headstock are also patented. Something as simple as not having to take off a truss-rod cover when you want to adjust your neck was another improvement I thought I could make.

When I designed the carving of the inside of my tops and backs, I designed an integral soundpost that the bridge posts set into. This soundpost comes down from the top to touch the neck and comes up from the back to touch the neck. When the neck is glued to the top and back, it creates a solid structure tying the two plates together. I created this design for two reasons; One, to stop any physical distortion in the top over the years; and two, the same concept as a soundpost in a violin – to transmit tone from the top through the back.

Now it came time to decide on the components that would go on this instrument. Again, I know that hundreds of thousands of instruments have been built with truss-rods that adjust in one direction, but all I can think to myself is, “Why?” So, I chose a two-way adjustable truss rod so that no matter what the humidity is doing to the neck, you should be able to adjust it where it needs to be.



When you’re in repair, you hear so many horror stories from people who take the strings off their brand new instruments, then watch the tailpieces slide down the finish of their brand new tops, and put the bridges on backwards after they fall off as well! A friend of mine turned me on to Tonepros. The

Tonepros bridge locks onto the posts so that it won’t fall off when the strings are taken off the instrument. I thought to myself, “The guy who designed this is a kindred spirit.” So that was a no-brainer. I contacted Dwight at Tonepros and said, “I’ve got to use your parts!”

A friend of mine said to me once, “You can’t sell sound.

Everybody’s ears are different.” And, I know that there are a lot of great pickup makers out there, but I’ve always been very impressed with the tone that I get from Lindy Fralin pickups and I’ve always found Lindy to be very knowledgeable about the sound he was going after. Lindy worked with me in the design of the pickups because it was important to me to have a 5-way switch on these guitars for coil-tapping, but I was never pleased with cutting off one coil and cutting the volume of the pickup in half. So, Lindy winds my humbuckers asymmetrically so that the single coil will retain most of the volume of the full humbucker. The neck pickup is 8 K ohms. The screw coil is 4.5k and the slug coil is 3.5k. The bridge pickup is 9.2k. The screw coil is 5.2k and the slug coil is 4k. The screw coils are hotter, as they’re the ones that are tapped for single coils.



And then, of course, clients who purchase your guitars can teach you so much about what they want,

leading you to further designs. For instance, a client and a good friend from Arkansas called and said that he loved all the tones on the guitar, except for 4th position bridge single coil by itself. He felt that it was too thin. He turned me on to the concept of wiring both single coils together in the 4th position. This way, just like the third position, the independent volume controls can be used to tailor the sound of both single coils.

Another example of a client aiding in design was one who decided he wanted to design his own diamond inlays. We hired Todd Reith at Custom Luthiers to cut the diamonds and pocket the boards. When the guitar was finished, the client gave us permission to use his design for a royalty payment of a bottle of single barrel Jack Daniel’s after 35 fingerboards. Thanks, JS!

The Fusion has a number of features that I think make it unique:



It has a bolt-on version of my patented neck joint that I call the “Inset Neck.” The neck joint is flush with the back of the guitar, so that there’s no block of wood impeding

access to the upper register. The neck extends into the back of the body, which in my opinion contributes to stability and sustain. The neck bolts go through the body from under the pick-

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ups and screw into metal inserts that are installed in the neck.

I use a 16" fretboard radius for better bends, and an angled headstock, so that you don't need string trees. I used the same, patented design to strengthen the headstock-neck joint that I used on the archtop.



I gave the guitar a 4 1/2 degree neck angle and a carved surface for the pickguard, which allow your strumming

hand to float over the top of the controls. When I play a Strat, my little finger keeps hitting the volume knob, which doesn't happen on the Fusion. In fact, the pickguard is actually curved across the face of the instrument to give the player even more clearance. I also designed a beveled, oval hole in the back cover, so that it didn't have to come off to change the strings.



The neck is 2-piece, quartersawn, like the archtop, and is really strong. It extends 5 1/4" into the

guitar, for maximum stability. I also gave the Fusion a blend pot that links the neck and bridge pickups.

TQR: How do you approach wiring and pickup specs (and tone) specifically?



As I mentioned earlier, we have a wonderful relationship with Lindy Fralin, who helps us develop pickups to get the most out of our instruments. We think that our guitars have wonderful tone. However, we keep trying new combinations and components, in the hope to make them even better. Currently, we are experimenting with oil-

filled caps, which show great promise.

TQR: Where do you source the wood you use and can you describe any unique features or qualities of the wood used in your guitars?

This is one area where I stayed fairly traditional. I think that the woods used in a specific guitar contribute tremendously to the tone of that instrument. The Elite is an all maple thin-line archtop. Of my archtop guitars, this one has the brightest sound and great sustain.

The Jazz Elite has maple back sides and neck, but a carved spruce top, which is more suited to traditional Jazz styles.

The Professional has mahogany back, sides and neck, with a maple top. Its sound is warmer and woodier than the Elite.



I remember standing at my bench one day and Dana Bourgeois told me that the most recorded acoustic guitar in Nashville was a Martin D18 because mahogany and spruce recorded better than rosewood and spruce. So, when it came time for me to design the Professional Acoustic, I knew that I wanted to use mahogany and spruce, and I, along with the clients who own this model, feel that this combination of woods really works. The Blues Queen is mahogany sides back and neck, with a maple top and no F-holes. I chose not to put F-holes on this model because P-90s are big single coils and I thought that the instrument would behave better being chambered than it would if it had f-holes.

For the Fusion, I chose alder for the body and rock maple for the neck, which contribute tremendously to the traditional Strat tone that I wanted out of this instrument.

TQR: How many instruments have you built, and how have they evolved since their introduction?

Before starting CP Thornton Guitars, and not counting the first eight bolt-on basses, I built 41 basses and 32 through-neck solidbody guitars. I was one of about 10 builders who made close to 3000 acoustic guitars with Dana Bourgeois. I also helped build somewhere around thirty violins, three violas, and three cellos with Jon Cooper. CPT Guitars has pro-

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duced approximately ninety thinline archtops and eleven Fusions to date. Until very recently, CPT guitars has consisted

of me, myself and I in the workshop on a daily basis, with Richard behind the scenes running the business, doing the photography, and programming the website. However, we just hired a part-time employee, and we currently produce approximately sixty instruments per year.

The design of the thinline archtop has not been changed significantly since its introduction three years ago. However, I think that instruments and instrument builders, just like fine wine, improve with age.

TQR: What options are available?



I don't make fully custom guitars. For example, I stick to my guitar designs, with a 25" scale length. However, I do have a number of options available.

All my guitars come with a choice of Dunlop 6100 or 6105 fretwire. The Fusion guitars come with the option of a humbucker in the bridge position, birdseye maple or rosewood fretboard, and a number of vintage colors.

On the archtops, I can mix the features of the various models if the customer wants. For example, I can add f-holes or a



sunburst to a Blues Queen or add an acoustic pickup to a Jazz Elite. You can also specify a quilt maple top instead of flame, and I keep standard and higher grades of wood available. Recently, I've been getting a lot

of requests for rosewood fingerboards, with matching headstocks and tailpieces.

I finish the guitars with a choice of a four different sunbursts (honey, dark honey, tobacco and dark cherry), a toned finish, and Black and Gold tops. If customers want different finish colors, I'll accommodate them if I can. I also offer custom board inlays and a choice of 1 11/16" or 1 3/4" nut width.

Finally, I offer two different wiring options, the standard 5-way switch and one with a 3 way switch and push-pull coil taps. If someone wants their own pickups or a special control setup, I can usually do that for them as well.

TQR: What's ahead?

I'm a lot like that kid in the movie "The 6th Sense." Instead of seeing dead people, I wake up in the middle of the night with a new guitar design in my head. The next time this happens, I'll know what I'm going to design next.

Lastly, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the people already mentioned, for myself and for the company. They are truly honorable gentlemen and without them, I could not be doing what I do today.

REVIEW

The decision to invest in a guitar made by an independent builder carries a certain weight that does not apply to more common production instruments. Familiar models like Strats, Telecasters, Les Pauls, 335s, and PRS guitars constantly change hands, and their value in the market is fairly clear and widely accepted. However, the perceived value of instruments made by less well-known builders like Terry McInturff, Nik Huber, Juha Ruokangas or Chuck Thornton is dictated by a smaller group of discerning players and collectors. And for some, the perception of how well an instrument may retain its value or even appreciate over time is important. We understand, but such thinking can also lead to a profoundly shortsighted approach in choosing an exceptional guitar you intend to play.



Unless he begins hiring help, Chuck Thornton is on a pace to build sixty guitars a year for what? Twenty years? That's 1200 guitars in his lifetime, more or less – the number of instruments the Gibson Custom Shop will build in a week. And a Thornton guitar is never going to be viewed

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historically in the same manner as a quirky Mosrite, early B.C. Rich or an 11-pound '80s Schecter Stratocaster... Our point is, if you are intrigued by the exceptional craftsmanship and unique designs offered by small-production, custom builders, but you have resisted following your heart out of concern for their investment value, all the more reason to buy a Thornton. There will always be a market for rare and exceptional instruments, and it will be populated by players and collectors who can afford them. More to the point, the current demand for Thornton's guitars exceeds his ability to build them, yet they cost no more than a comparable "custom shop" model.

Chuck Thornton sent us three guitar for review, and if he had sent us a black Blues Queen, we swear he'd have never gotten it back. We love Thornton's guitars – the look of them, the feel, playability, tone and design, and you're about to discover why.

The Fusion



Loosely inspired by the classic bolt-on Fender design, the Fusion deftly eliminates the inherent shortcomings of a typical Stratocaster while enhancing playability and retaining the true sound of a great 3-pickup, single coil solidbody. The alder Fusion we received for review offers clever and practical solutions to issues most of us have simply learned to live with in the past – easy access to the truss rod

adjustment, access to the inertia block that allows string changes without removing the back cover, and a true neck angle and headstock pitch that make neck pocket shims and string retainers seem like obsolete band-aids. The Fusion's extended heel and 'stealth' bolt-on design also make perfect sense, and seem to produce a more direct and cohesive sound. We might change the flat 16" fingerboard radius to a 9.5" (personal preference), but the Fusion is exceptionally comfortable and easy to play. The neck shape is a modest 'C', fret wire is medium-jumbo 6100, and the Fusion arrived perfectly intonated with uniformly low action from the perfectly cut nut to the last fret. And how does it sound? Bright and extremely vocal in all five positions (including a neck/bridge blend pot), with sustaining qualities you won't hear in a typi-



cal guitar with a Strat-style tremolo. The tone of the Fusion just seems more substantial played cleanly, with a solid clarity that avoids sounding weak or compromised by odd harmonic overtones and inconsistencies in string volume from the staggered pole pieces. It's fair to say that the Fusion is an intelligently evolved alternative to the Stratocaster, yet its design avoids appearing so evolved that it resembles a science project. This is a guitar with a unique style that you will want to pick up and play, and a range of tones that completely cover and expand on those found in a vintage-style Stratocaster.

Blues Queen



This was our favorite for reasons that should be obvious, and at \$3,000, the Blues Queen is a screaming deal on a screaming guitar that also excels at a mere whisper. Yes, *you want this*. Thornton uses gorgeous mahogany in his guitars, and the amber, natural tint really brings out the striking grain of our favorite "tone wood." Chambered with a carved top and back, our review instrument weighed 7 pounds and was flawlessly put together. Of course, Thornton's neck joint design that allows unimpeded access to the entire fingerboard is a work of art, and like the Fusion, the Blues Queen is an astounding player. The neck shape is slightly less of a handful than a typical reissue '59 Les Paul, measuring 7/8" deep compared to a typical reissue '59 neck at 1". Best of all, the Blues

Queen transcends the usual image of a P90 equipped guitar being best used as a hot, smokin' mess. Yes, you can hawg this purty girl through a busted up amp and do the wild thing – the tone is aggressive and honest... But the Blues Queen also reveals the wonderful, *cleaner* side of P90s that works so well for a variety of musical styles. The neck pickup is warm



and thick, yet clear and unhobbled by the woofy character that can plague neck humbuckers. Combining

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both pickups yields a predictable mix of sharper trebly tones anchored with the weight of the neck P90, and the bridge is clear, smooth, edgy and bright. There is also a notable acoustic quality in the Blues Queen that is lacking in solidbodies – a bit of a tradeoff in that the chambered mahogany body and ebony fingerboard do not quite dredge up the plodding, sometimes dull heaviness of a typical goldtop, for example. This is not a matter of “better,” necessarily, but different. The Blues Queen is endowed with a more versatile range of attitudes than typical solidbodies, and it can produce beautiful tones played cleanly that most solidbodies just can’t muster. *Highly* recommended.

The Elite



We’ve been picking up variations on semi-hollowbody electrics at every opportunity recently, always with the thought of a future article fueling our search for something worth pursuing. So when we lifted the the semi-hollow Thornton Elite from its case, the sound and feel of typical plywood electrics (extremely variable) had been firmly imprinted in our memory. And like the Fusion and Blues Queen, the Elite behaves and sounds like a more evolved and versatile descendant of a true archtop, but with the punchy sustain of a solidbody.

The Elite body is built from solid maple utilizing a very clever ‘neck-thru’ design. Our review instrument was

equipped with 6100 frets, 16" fretboard radius, ebony fingerboard and the same neck shape as the Blues Queen. Thornton



offers a 1 11/16" or 1 3/4" nut width on the Elite as well. All Thornton archtops feature TonePros hardware, and like the Blues Queen, the Elite is shipped with non-locking, Gotoh 510 Series 18:1 tuners.

The Fralin humbucking pickups in the Elite are wired with a DiMarzio ‘multi-pole’ 5-way switch that yields the usual



neck/middle/bridge combinations plus a neck single coil and neck/bridge single coil combination.

We weren’t quite able to produce the intensity of our Nocaster with the single coil taps on the Elite, but they do offer an expanded range of tones that is more usable than many of the tapped humbuckers we’ve played.

This is no accident; Lindy Fralin purposely

winds tapped humbuckers to produce exceptional single coil tone. Overall, the Elite is far more lively and articulate than a plywood box, with a good acoustic voice played clean at moderate volume. Cranked up, the overdriven tones are full, fat and solid with good sustain. There isn’t a dark, honking tone to be found in this guitar, but its trebly character also doesn’t mask the warmth of the lower strings. The Elite can cut through the mix and a band with authority, yet also sound beautifully rich and detailed as a solo instrument.



Other features common to Chuck Thornton’s guitars include solid wood control cavity covers, control cavity shielding, foil and oil tone caps, optional diamond inlays, rosewood or ebony fingerboard, Dunlop 6105 fret wire, and a nice range of finish colors and degree of

figure on maple tops. Prices start at just \$2,250 for the Fusion, \$3,000 for the Blues Queen, to \$3,530 for the Elite. See the web site for a full list of options and models not reviewed here.

If you have been secretly hoping to discover a guitar that can rekindle your passion for the instrument... one that clearly surpasses the ordinary in craftsmanship, design, playability, tone and value, you can’t do better than a CP Thornton.

Order yours now... you can thank us later. **To**

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