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Hand-crafted audio artistry from NYC

Blackie Pagano builds custom gear, and counts David Bowie, Nada Surf, and the Strokes as customers.



by Steve Guttenberg | June 30, 2012 7:36 AM PDT

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Blackie Pagano's skills as a repair technician and designer of one-of-a-kind electronics and speakers have ensured a steady stream of happy customers. He started in New York City, relocated to LA and lived there for seven years, but now he's back in NYC. He's played guitar and bass since he was 11, been a roadie, then a live sound engineer, a recording engineer, and a studio tech; through it all, he's been just a guy who loves building stunning works of not just art, but art that also sounds great.

Pagano mostly makes his living repairing musical instrument amps and hi-fi electronics, but it's the art that lights his fire. You can see it in his eyes; the challenges of making something new each time keep him in the game. One time it was the craziest iPod speaker I've ever seen; another time it was a totally tricked-out guitar amp. But he's not interested in building recreations of 1960s Fender amps. If that's what you want, Pagano says he thinks it makes more sense to just buy one -- they already sound good. But he might, if the customer insists, take a stock guitar amp, rebuild it with better parts, and then design a wild-looking new case to house the amp. To Pagano, nothing's more important than intuition, that's what drives music and art. That said, he's not totally a seat of the pants designer, he uses test and measurement gear to perfect his projects.



Blackie Pagano with a design element for a work in progress. (Credit: Steve Guttenberg/CNET)

Pagano designs use tube or solid-state circuits, but in his heart he's a tube guy. When I asked him why, he quoted the Cramps' singer, Lux Interior: "I love tubes, they turn music into fire and fire back into music." That's such a great line, and perfectly expresses the magic of tubes, and why most professional, big name guitar players use tube amps.

Pagano always has a sonic goal in mind for each



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The Grand Champion guitar amp, shown from the rear.
(Credit: Blackie Pagano)

project, and it's important to make something that looks the part. Most Pagano amps have [Plexiglas rear panels](#), so you can see the inside's "guts." Talking with Pagano in his East Village workshop, the pride he takes in making his "builds" beautiful, inside and out, is palpable. He's currently working out the ideas for a new amp with capacitors sheathed in candy wrappers! The inspiration for the designs may come from Pagano's feeling about the person who's commissioned the work, but he's just as likely to build something just to please himself. A typical project may require 100 or more hours to complete, and he builds half a dozen or so pieces per year.

Check out Pagano's Web site to see more of his handiwork; I've selected his Grand Champion guitar amp as a starting point. He also makes home hi-fi amps, and even fabulously creative [iPod docks](#) and speakers. Clearly, it's all about having fun with the gear, and Pagano is definitely having a lot of fun.

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About Steve Guttenberg

Ex-movie theater projectionist Steve Guttenberg has also worked as a high-end audio salesman, and as a record producer. Steve currently reviews audio products for CNET and works as a freelance writer for Home Theater, Inner Fidelity, Tone Audio, and Stereophile.

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I'm so sad that after a short stay in L.A. Blackie packed it up and moved back to New York. I called him the other day in NY because he came so highly recommend to give him some repair work but found out he moved on. L.A.'s Loss, New York's gain....Come back Blackie.

Posted by [feverboy777](#) (120 comments)
June 30, 2012 8:34 AM (PDT)

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