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Restoring The Radius Burst



It's not every day that one gets to restore an iconic instrument such as a 'burst! The following story involves one of Italy's most iconic instruments and the team of experts it took to restore this piece to its former glory. Quest forth....

www.tonequest.com



Body



Back of headstock

Making it all happen properly in the time given was a huge challenge—but, I love a good challenge!

TQ—Tom Guerra

www.tomGuerra.com

EXPERT GUITAR AMP AND AUDIO REPAIR

Blackie Pagano Interview



Blackie Pagano Shop in New York

TQ: How in the world did all this happen for you? Some crazy uncle that played guitar?

You know what? It's not far from the uncle. It starts with me sitting on my bed as a kid in suburban Maryland, learning riffs from records. The guitar was

a pre-War National Duolian. My mother was a music teacher in Prince George's County. The principal of the school had a guitar in the attic that was passed on to my sister, through mom. My sister didn't like it because it was made of metal and weird, so I lucked out. I had already been hacking away with a Stella guitar with terrible action. This was the late '60s. The Smithsonian had a folk festival every year on the Fourth of July. I was 11, went there, and saw a table with Yazoo, Arhoolie, and other Delta blues revival records from the late 1920s, early 1930s. One of them was Bukka White, who was holding a guitar just like mine, so I bought it. He was a fierce slide guitar player, incredibly percussive. These were guys who had initially recorded in the 1920s and some were brought back into studios and stages to play again later. I started trying to imitate his record, and it was my start. Later I got into electric. The high-profile English players like Clapton would always give props to the old Delta blues guys, so I found that then. And to this day, I feel everything that had to be said about the human condition and life was all in there. Relationships, bosses—it was all covered and sung about in the 1930s Delta blues. The genre really forms the expressive backbone of everything that came after.

TQR: Did you play in some bands?



Late-'80s Rock Band

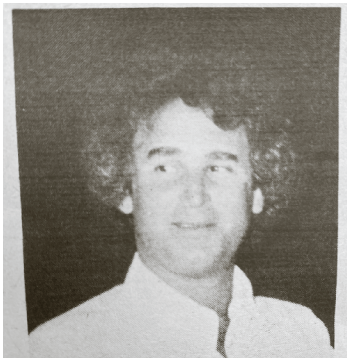
I spent most of my time in my room playing guitar, reading, and listening to the radio. There were heavy bands roaming around DC, plus tons of hippies doing their thing. Danny Gatton was there, and Nils Lofgren. I had my first band when I was a teenager, playing slide guitar in a duo, with a friend of mine who was a great fingerpicker and could play the Reverend Gary Davis stuff. We played coffeehouses and folkie joints. I didn't do much professionally until the mid to late '80s. That '80s "Americana" band was a journeyman bar band that played four nights a week, three sets a night for drunk people. Easily the most fun I've had playing, haha. I had already been working in tech as a roadie, sound man, and more. That band got a record deal and recorded two albums for the indie label Enigma, did some touring. Later I played with David Johansen, Mojo Nixon, Heavy Trash, mostly sideman stuff playing bass.

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I was really into audio tech and had a job at a studio in midtown NYC, as an apprentice maintenance engineer, and was mentored by a brilliant engineer, my friend Rick Elliker. This studio was originally opened in the '50s. It had two floors in midtown with composers and music editors on site. This was sort of the golden age of studios in NYC, where ad agencies would come in to make commercials, audio books with actors, industrial presentations, etc. That's where I first started learning to repair things. I always had the tube audio bug. Even my stereo at the time was an old Harman Kardon Citation.

TQR: Between the '80s and '90s, that was your full-time gig? Did you have an RCA tube manual and go from there?

I was repairing stuff. I was in the studio and touring and gigging bars with my band. I needed a flexible job. By 1989, I was repairing amplifiers on my kitchen table in my apartment in New York. There was a studio called Coyote in north Brooklyn. A great guitar player and producer named Eric Ambel gave me a job wiring the entire place, my first job as an independent. We didn't use multi-pin connectors then; it was all soldering joints to patch bays, very labor intensive. I used the earnings to buy an oscilloscope and tools. Guitar amps were coming in. Mike Matthews of Electro-Harmonix was nearby with his tube-importing company called New Sensor in his loft just up the street. I would go there and buy tubes. This was after his regional company went bankrupt and he had restarted as a tube importer. I'd bring cash and buy tubes I needed that day for repairs.



Mike Matthews

TQR: We love the big-box vintage Deluxe Memory Man pedals and did an interview with him recently. We had four of them, but Mr. Valco talked us out of one. Ahahaha.

Yes, he was making pedals then and revived all the old designs. Now he has dozens of them, some amazing stuff, but he's still a big tube importer and manufacturer. He now owns Tung-Sol, Mullard, etc., three factories in Russia producing tubes.

TQR: Let's talk about modern amps versus vintage.

Here's the thing: There are a million right ways to do everything. It's just a question of your engineering viewpoint. There are plenty of great-sounding modern amps, but often the construction quality is not up to par. They won't last as long as the older point-to-point types, thanks to circuit boards that aren't as heat-

friendly. They are built to price points. Mass production today is a whole different animal than it was in the '50s through the '80s. Some are better than others. Reliability usually follows the price point, although I have found some expensive modern amps that aren't reliable, due to construction or design flaws. You can spend three to four grand on a modern amp and have it last 10 years before the manufacturer no longer supports repair with parts, etc. The vintage gear lasts 30 to 40 years, and with an overhaul at that point, does another 30 to 40 years on just regular maintenance!

TQR: A great small-batch builder can make the grade.

A hundred percent. There are some great builders who follow the old recipes. The parts are available. It's actually easy to build good-sounding amps. It's a fairly competitive segment of the market, since vintage amps are valuable. Cloning is quite the cottage industry. Building amps with unique character, that "certain something," is a bit more demanding, and fewer builders achieve that. That's always my goal, to achieve a high bar of beauty, both sonically and cosmetically. One thing I've learned is that guitar players are very much traditional in what they want to hear in a design. Fender, Marshall tones, etc.—they haven't changed much. Tubes these days can't compare, that's for sure.

TQR: There are some great transformers being made today, too.

Most definitely! Japan never stopped developing transformers; they are serious audiophiles. Some good transformer companies have gone out of business lately, which is a bummer. The margins are tough, and it becomes impractical to stay in business.



Custom Build Front Blackie Pagano

TQR: Favorite models of yours through the years?

Oh yeah! There is no best. But I love the obvious stuff. Fender, Marshall, but the smaller companies like Danelectro and Valco, Traynor, and Ampeg made

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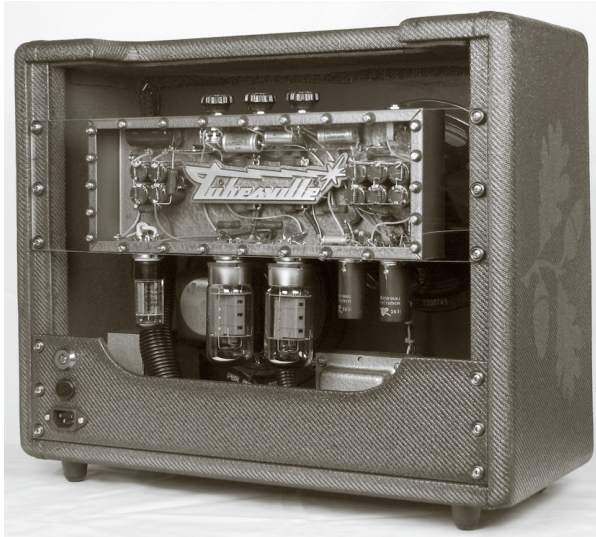
some terrific stuff, as well. I like them all! I pick them for what they do best. Most great amps only have a couple things they do well. Gains or cleans, surfy, or rich distortion—players should be able to get a tone they like within 30 seconds. Great amps typically give out the goods quick. There are also some obscure circuits that I feel are pretty magical that are lesser known or were built in smaller numbers, so one doesn't encounter them often, but repairing as many devices as I have over the years, I've seen pretty much everything. I plan on building some of those "lost circuit" amps and offering them for sale. You won't find them in digital modelers, and they can be done with tubes that are readily available in very high-quality NOS for not-crazy prices. No worries about future availability, no reliance on current manufacture or supply chains.

TQR: Favorite capacitors and components these days? Chris Young at Jupiter is doing some amazing things.

That's a great subject. Components will always sound like what they are made of. If I'm doing a black-panel Fender restoration that might have been hacked or needs to be restored back to factory spec, the parts I use for that are highly specific. Fender amps are expertly voiced, but they will sound very different with modern parts. You have to be careful, purposeful in your parts selections. Parts selections need to be tailored to the piece at hand.

TQR: You don't just rip out the whole vintage board and fill it with orange drops?

Ahahaha! By the way, there are some six types of orange drops, all different. I like to cut film caps open and look at them to verify. Some boutique brands sell caps that look like the older types, but they are different materials and don't sound the same. There is an orange drop that is a decent replacement for the



Typical Custom Build Rear Blackie Pagano

blue Ajax caps, although the Ajax caps almost never fail. The electrolytics I use for Fender restorations are scarcer than ever, and expensive at this point. Sourcing is a challenge. Tubes these days vary quite a bit in quality, I have a state-of-the-art curve tracer tube tester that measures every parameter. I reject many. Amps often roll in with great old tubes like Telefunks and Mullards, and if they test good, you know they stay right in there. They often sound so wonderful. I do swap them around to positions in the amp that may be more critical, like taking one from a tremolo oscillator position to a gain stage. Telefunks seem to last forever, unreal.

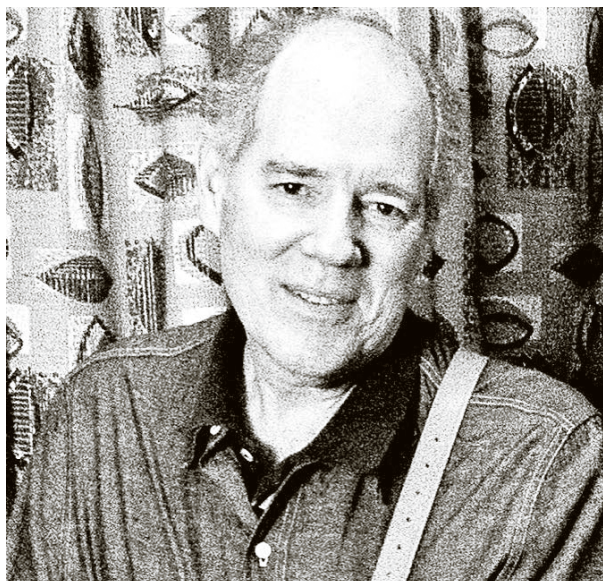
TQR: Speakers can be interesting. We sourced a 1972 Greenback with the original cone, and it was so killer. We really love the Eminence Alessandro SC59 12" speaker as a wicked and beautiful all-around magical alnico for Deluxe Reverbs and Tweeds. We just ordered another one. We even stack a vintage Princeton Reverb on a cabinet with that or the 1960 Jensen P15N, and it is special. The Jupiter 12LA is another great one.

For sure. Early, used Greenbacks have a lower sensitivity [dB/watt] that is so sweet. Those smaller voice coils are touch-sensitive and warm. They have somewhat less efficiency, so when you start to hammer them, they sound so smooth. Modern ceramic speakers may have a higher wattage capacity and sensitivity rating, but are not as organic feeling and sounding. One of my favorites is the Celestion black back. That's a fantastic-sounding speaker from the same era. Cones age; they are vibrating paper! Sixty-year-old paper will sound different. Recones can sound newer but be okay. What choice do you have at some point? You have to. I have no problem with that. Just stay as close to originals as you can source. For old Deluxe Reverbs, I like the Weber Ferromax. Nice fidelity. Clients want different things, maybe fatter, darker, less efficient—I make choices based on the client's preferences, which vary quite a bit. They are 20-watt or so amps, so you want something efficient, especially when playing with a drummer.

TQR: Do you ever work on vintage Echoplexes? Our friend Jeff Bakos calls them shitty tape machines that do the most glorious thing in the world. We agree. Have a pair of them—so good. We plug anyone who visits into them, and their jaws always drop.

Yeah! I have a prototype in here, believe it or not. I love the EP1s and 2s. They are funky-ass devices! They are not precision machines by any stretch of the word. They are crude, primitive, and killer. They have a fairly simple tube circuit, heads and tape cartridges, adjustments, but heck yes. Have fun hauling that around for a tour! The warmth of that preamp is absolutely so nice.

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John Peden

TQR: John Peden told us you worked on his original Fender Woody amps.

Yes! I just restored some Macintosh hi-fis for John not too long ago. I've met a lot of people through John, like Ritchie Fliegler and others. His Tone Lounge is fun. I've gone through his amps one at a time.

TQR: Yes, David and I were there, and brought along Jay Jay French of Twisted Sister. What a hoot that was. Do you have any stories or experiences to relate with the higher profile players among your clients?

You know, the major artists rarely show up to drop off their amplifiers. They have people to do that. I once got a call from Lou Reed, who was chasing some tones, that was amusing. GE Smith shows up himself and spends time. He cares so much about his tone. His taste is impeccable. He taught me how to play the "Smokestack Lightning" riff with an added G, which is 10 times cooler than what I was doing. I made him an amp back in the '90s, which he tells me he uses quite a lot. I may reproduce that circuit and make a few available. One amp that came in in L.A. had the initials EC, which reportedly stood for



GE Smith

Eddie Cochran, and I'm a rockabilly fan. There have been so many historic amps brought in over the years, more than I can recall or even count! Typically, I'm just sitting in a room alone, soldering. I even did a tweed Bassman for the Museum of Modern Art. Too fun. The custom amp I built for Tim Parnin of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame came out great.

TQR: You're based out of Cleveland? The HOF is there. Guitar Riot is a great store. Chris Young of Jupiter is nearby, Tom Bukovac was from there. What a badass little part of the guitar world.



Blackie's Shop

Yes, it is such an interesting, productive place. Guitar Riot is a fantastic shop, they have all the Gibson and Fender custom shop stuff, and the staff are all great guys and great musicians to boot! Just the kind of guys you want to buy a quality guitar from. Overall, Cleveland has been incredibly good to me. This is the "fertile crescent" of rock and roll, from Akron up to Detroit. I still bounce to NYC a lot, too. Things are thriving here, as far as work goes for me. I feel like modern rock and roll was born here, with Peter Laughner, Pere Ubu—tons of known and unknown innovative punk bands busted out of here. The DJ Alan Freed, of course, Ghouardi, instrumental figures. There are definitely some cool amps hiding out here. A grey-beard biker brought me a '50s tweed Bassman to work on. It had belonged to Stiv Bators of The Dead Boys He referred to him as "little Stevie Bader." So, funny the things that pop up. The roots are here.

TQR: Can our readers send work to you? What's ahead for you from here?

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LA Loft Workshop

I'm currently moving to a big loft in Los Angeles. I'll be open by May 1, 2024, and already booking jobs from my website now. Yeah, for sure, your readers can send me work! Ninety-nine percent of my business is the kid next door with the Hot Rod Deluxe; let's be real. I have done this day-in and day-out, for 35 years now, six days a week. I'm here to fix the amps! Plenty of hi-fi, work as well. Those are easier to ship than guitar amps. Anyone can call me and leave a message. I listen to all of them and call them right back to answer questions. Going forward, I'll be doing a lot of focus on the original builds. My strongest drive is to make beautiful things, work with my hands. I love doing vintage restorations, for sure. At risk of sounding pretentious, I'll say it borders on a spiritual practice for me. Never gets old, feels deeply restorative personally, and so satisfying to do. **TQ**—*Riverhorse*



blackiepagano.com

CARR AMPS

Steve Carr Feature Interview



Bel-Ray Group

TQR: Give us a quick refresher on your path in music and amps, since it has been a while since we've celebrated you here, many times in depth.

I started playing in bands before high school and was a bass player at first. It was a fun thing to do, and we played out wherever we could. That started a lifelong joy for playing music. I went to Purdue University in the eighties. It may have been the only place in the world that had more bass players than guitarists. Normally, there are a million guitar players for every bass player or drummer. I switched to guitar because that's what was needed, and I still am a guitarist today. I've been in bands pretty much my whole life.

As time went on, I got more and more interested in the gear aspect. I had an old Marshall and befriended a guy who had a repair shop and would let me hang out. It became more fascinating to me. I wanted to intern with him, but he didn't have time. But, he encouraged me to build a tweed Fender Champ to learn from that. This was the early nineties, and we didn't have all the resources we have today, like the kits you can buy. Now there are parts everywhere you look. It forced me to learn how to read a schematic, and where to find parts from industrial suppliers, learn about transformers, etc. So that was a great education. I built the Champ, and it didn't work, which was super depressing. Over the next week, I figured it out and got it working. Then I was hooked and couldn't stop. So, I soon made an ad claiming I could repair amps for people, even though in no way was I qualified to do that [laughs]. Around here in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, there are tons of players and original music, so it was a great repair atmosphere. Everybody needed something done.

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