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Mountainview Publishing, LLC

the ToneQuest

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone **Report™**
\$15.00 US, December 2008/VOL.10 NO.2

Cheap Thrills

"To tune the spirit when someone is trampling on you is called control."

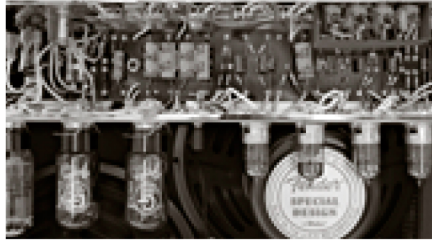
—Carlos Castaneda

The wheels of commerce have crumbled to sub-prime fairy dust beneath the weight of a failed global economy, our prospects for hope and happiness bundled and sold for certain uncertainty, and all we can do is dumbly watch the carnage in hi-def with the heat turned down. As paper wealth evaporates, otherwise rational minds descend into paranoid thoughts of a New Age of Impending Doom, foreclosed to live out the rest of our miserable days in surplus FEMA trailers until succumbing in our sleep to carbon monoxide poisoning from a cheap FEMA space heater.



But wait a minute... gasoline is under three bucks a gallon! Well rock the casbah, and may your withering carbon footprint lead to a Super Walmart stocked with two dollar cheese balls, Asti Spumanti, and last year's Twisted Christmas album for \$1.98. Verily in these perilous times, blathering on about how you might fix, amend or elevate your precious tone may seem frivolous and inconsequential at best. But we can also embrace a calmer and eloquently more optimistic view...

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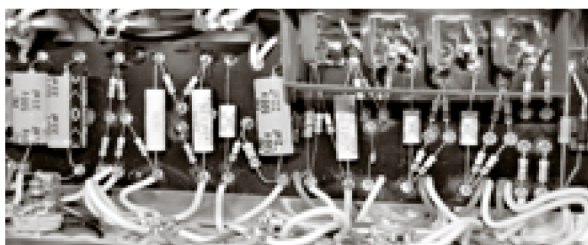
fans of Mercury, while others have worked with manufacturers like Heyboer and Hammond for years. Each

company has their followers, and the same can be said for the capacitors used today in building amplifiers. In the booteek world, you'll often see Sprague, F&T or Solen electrolytic caps. Fender chose to use Illinois electrolytics, in part, we assume, because their smaller size enables them to actually fit on the board as originally designed (leaving room for the added bias pot), while the big, blue Spragues used by many custom amp builders will not. Jeff Bakos agreed that it's largely a moot point – he likes the Illinois caps and uses them frequently for repairs. You'll find them in Sampson-era Matchless amps as well. Fender chose Xicon polypropylene coupling caps for the Twin, and when it comes to coupling capacitors, you'll find lots of conflicting opinions. Some people *luv* SBE Orange Drop polypropylene film caps – others prefer German F&Ts, or the foil and polyester film replica

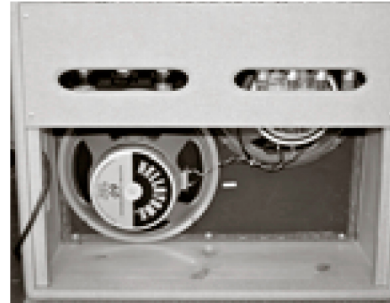


'mustard caps' by Sozo. Jeff suggested that we replace the Xicons in the Twin with metalized polyester 150M 'Mallory' caps – a very popular replacement in Fender amps that many believe imparts a smoother, warmer tone than, say... Orange Drops. We agree. Whatever you choose, be prepared for delayed gratification. There is a break-in period with all signal-carrying components, and new coupling

caps can require as much as 50-100 hours before they are effectively burned-in. We burned in the Twin for 48 hours after replacing the caps, and while the full effect may yet to be realized, we do hear a subtle smoothing effect from the Mallory 150s that is less grainy and metallic than the Xicons. What's left in our optimization of the '57 Twin? Not much. We run ours with one rectifier more often than not, and it is undoubtedly one of the most toneful, character-laden and inspiring amps we have owned or reviewed in these pages. Warmer with more organic mids than a typical blackface,



brighter than the brown-era amps, yet less aggressive, loud, trebly and in-your-face than a blonde Bassman, the Twin creates its own beautiful space played clean or cranked into singing sustain and round, woody distortion. Even pushed hard, the sound of the Twin remains uniquely clear and defined, and it is also a very pedal-friendly amp for fans of boost and overdrive effects.



As much as we disliked the Twin 'out of the box,' we now enthusiastically embraced it with the same conviction. With the exception of a tube clamp breaking and a somewhat flimsy

leather handle for a 60-pound amp that we replaced, the workmanship and fine detail found in the Twin is clearly comparable to any booteek tweed, with an artfully applied, lacquered tweed covering, solid pine cabinet, stout plywood baffleboard and precisely hand-wired circuit. All the Twin really needs is... reverb. Well, here ya go...

Mr. Springgy

As an amp tech, designer, and founder of Metaltronix in the early '80s, Lee Jackson was among the first custom amp builders who cleared a path for the booteek industry that would fully bloom in the '90s. Jackson initially learned his craft at Fender working with legends like Ed Jahns and Freddie Tavares, and for over 25 years he has continually developed and refined his amps, mods and effects, as well as having written a book titled, "Ultimate Bench Warrior – How To Design, Modify and Build Guitar and Bass Amplifiers." due to be released this month (see Amazon.com).

Working in Austin, TX, Lee developed the Mr Springgy reverb pedal in 2007.



Now in version 2, it has been enthusiastically embraced by guitarists as a remarkably transparent, realistic and tone-enhancing alternative to digital reverb or

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spring reverb units. Here's the story behind the development of Mr Springgy, followed by our review.

"It all started when I was going to the L.A. Namm show in 2006. On the day of the show, I ran into an old friend that I had worked with at Ampeg – Steve Winkler, who was now working with Belton Industries, the manufacturer of reverb pans. They had just developed a new reverb pan replacement module, and he wanted me to hear it and offer my opinion before they went into an important meeting that afternoon with Fender, Marshall and Peavey. So, I listened to their demo and said, "Great concept but it sounds like crap." What I didn't know was the designer was present, and I was quickly ushered out of the room. After the show, Steve contacted me and asked if I would be their technical adviser and ears. They had been crucified by the majors at their meeting, and realized I was right. I began working with them on a weekly basis – they would send samples, and I would listen and then make notes and suggestions. The process was like pulling teeth, but they got it.

While all this was going on, I was doing my own experimenting with the modules, and I discovered I could tailor the module to sound just like an old Fender table top reverb, and that's as far as I am going in explaining what I am doing with the module. The stock modules from Belton sound great, but they do not sound like the Mr Springgy's and they will agree with me on that. Lets just say I mod the module before I use it.

Mr Springgy has gone through a couple of revisions since I introduced it in November 2007. I designed Mr Springgy as a lark to prove something to myself, then a couple of guitar players happened to be around and heard Mr Springgy, and they had to have one. Well, within weeks I started making Mr Springgys night and day, seven days a week. The first fifty or so had a trim pot on the inside which adjusted the level of reverb in the mix. What I quickly found is there is never



enough reverb in the world, and no one ever turned down the trim, so it was the first thing to go, which brought us to the most recent version where I added the "Wet" only feature. I have always listened to players, and I was getting a lot of e-mails asking for a "Wet" only feature, so as soon as I could add that feature, I did. The other thing I did was make a command decision on the Mr Springgy colors, and I decided on black only. On the earlier models I had offered them in gold and pink, but Texas weather has been so bad this last year that it has been

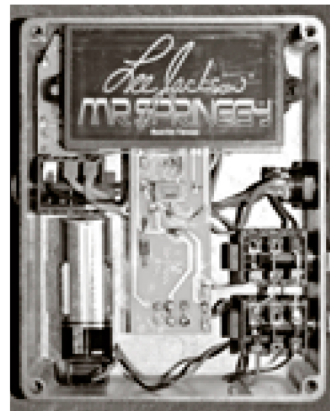
impossible to paint the colors and have them dry in under a week.

Mr Springgy is completely analog from input to output – there are *no* modeling or analog-to-digital or digital-to-analog converters. I also included one of my Crystal Clear Splitter Circuits so you can run multiple amps, and now with the "Wet only" feature you can have one amp wet and one amp dry for a huge, spatial sound. Plus, with the wet only, you can use Mr Springgy in the Studio or live mixing board. Mr Springgy is also quieter than the Fender Reverb unit it is recreating. It acts just like the Fender unit, meaning it works in the front of the amp for clean and with a little gain. If you use a lot of gain, then it needs to be in the loop of the amp. They sound great after distortion pedals, and should be the last effect in a chain of effects. I think if you play Blues, it will work great in the front of the amp. If you play metal, it would have to be in the loop, unless you use distortion pedals.

Can I also have a word here about "true bypass?" I get a lot of e-mail concerning this... OK, in the '50s, '60s and '70s, electronics – and especially *solid state* electronics, were a new frontier. A lot of companies had no idea what they were doing, and really didn't care as long as whatever they built was selling. So yes, many of those earlier effects suck all the life out of your instrument if you leave it in line. But this is 2008, and as designers, we now know how to design circuits that do not suck tone and actually enhance it. So, with that said, I have only heard how playing through Mr Springgy has improved the tone – On *and* Off. I have never built anything that was so loved by such a wide spectrum of players. I guess there is just never enough reverb in the world!"

SPECS:

*Powered by one 9V battery, or 9-12 vdc power supply
100 ma + center tip ground, like any standard Boss effect.
Not true bypass, but if you want to change it, I have made it
easy to change. I will not offer true bypass because I hate
effects that pop when you turn them off and on.*



MR SPRINGGY REVIEW

We've been extolling the virtues of even the slightest drip of reverb for years in amps that aren't so equipped, so why stop now? A Vox or Marshall is a beautiful thing supported by a little 'verb, and we have never heard a British amp with factory-equipped reverb that wasn't laugh-

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able, the absolute worst being a 50 watt Sound City head we once owned. Plenty of great vintage American amps were built without reverb as well – all the ‘50s Gibsons (and when Gibson *did* add reverb, it was brilliantly cheesy), tweed, brown and blonde Fenders, and the usual assortment of Ampegs and Valcos. Gutsy, stripped-down vintage amps are often hugely improved with reverb, and the big ‘57 Twin becomes two vintage amps in one – a tweedy tone monster dry, and one hell of a blackface amp wet, only better.

In the past, we’ve happily recommended the Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail and Holiest Grail reverb pedals as an alternative to moderately soulful reissue Fender reverb units and the pricier vintage boxes, which can be plagued with bad pans that need replacement and other quirky gremlins. The knock on the Grails has been less than robust roadworthiness, and in our experience, a tendency to just stop working until you disconnect and reconnect the power supply. We have also reviewed and recommended the \$249.00 TC Electronics Nova digital reverb – a durable and versatile pedal with loads of features – perhaps more than you need. Lee Jackson has elevated the reverb wars with an outstanding \$200 analog reverb pedal that simply does what you want with a supremely realistic sound and just one knob to deal with, plus a very cool wet/dry capability when using two amps. Mr Springgy sounds superb, with a big-pan reverb vibe that doesn’t sound boinky, hissy or difficult to dial in without slipping quickly into all or nothing heavy surf... Just smooth, liquid and lush analog 3-D reverb from a small box that won’t eat space in your gig bag or pedalboard. Great for acoustic instruments, keyboards, harp, fly gigs, and a most excellent stocking stuffer this holiday season. *Spring forth...To*

www.leejackson.com/

Vanilla Fudge

Lindy Fralin P90...



When taking the plunge on a new guitar isn't an option, the right pick-up swap can effectively

soothe that itch and transform an uninspiring guitar into one you can enjoy playing again. We've got a follow up to the April '08 Spanish Castle issue in the works, but our recent experience with Lindy Fralin's 'stock' soapbar P90 set

deserves your attention now... You'll recall our recent acquisition of a 2007 non-reverse Custom Shop Firebird – arguably our favorite P90 guitar to date, which is saying a lot, having owned and reviewed multiple goldtops, SGs, ES330s and Les Paul Juniors equipped with P90s in the past. We also acquired a couple of vintage '50s P90s this year, so we feel confident in our ability to assess the variable tones and voices available from new and vintage P90 pickups.



The Firebird is not only an unusual guitar from a design perspective – it also possesses a unique voice which we attribute to materials, design and construction. Unlike any other Gibson model, the non-reverse Firebird presents a relatively thin, elongated single slab of carved mahogany with a beefy mahogany set neck, rosewood fingerboard and tuneomatic bridge and stop tailpiece. All that gorgeous mahogany might lead you to conclude that the Firebird produces a naturally deep and heavy tone with understated treble response, but in reality, quite the opposite is true. In the bridge position the Firebird gracefully leans into sharp, biting Telecaster tones, admittedly with round and middy overtones, but sharp, nonetheless, sounding less taut and tense than the goldtops and Juniors we’ve owned. We initially found the stock Gibson P90 too shrill, while the neck position was less objectionable, but perhaps still a little too woofy. We replaced the Gibsons with a Lollar ‘50s set, still not happy with the overall voice of the guitar, which remained linear, beamy and one dimensional. Hard to put into words, but something was missing that became more evident as we evaluated speakers for this issue with the Firebird, among other guitars. Motivated now to make a move – not for the purpose of writing a review – but because we, like you, merely wanted a better tone – we bought a set of Lindy



Fralin ‘stock’ soapbar P90s which feature a 10% underwound neck pickup for better clarity and definition. Fralin typically uses the same USA-

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