

version that has proved its reliability with the previous owner. When they're good, they're *real* good.

Gibson also produced an updated version of the Velocette – the Goldtone GA15. Early models were built in England by Trace Elliot, and an upgraded version was subsequently built in the USA by Gibson. Again, players rave about the stellar tone of the GA15 and its punchy, big sound from such a compact box. Used GA15's can be found for \$350.

Valco Amps



Whether the name plate reads Supro, Valco, Gretsch, Bronson, McKinney, Oahu or National, 'Valcos' are always worth seeking out. Unfortunately, a lot of people agree, and prices will continue to rise. Act now, because they have no

where to go but up. We contacted "Mr. Valco" (Terry Dobbs) and asked him to comment on some of his favorite small amps made by Valco. Terry regards amps with the National name plate as the top of the Valco line, which extended from the post WWII era through the mid '60s. Among Terry's favorite Valco amps are the Spectator and the Supro Comet Deluxe, which was originally sold with a matching lapsteel. As an introduction to small Valco models, he recommends amps built in the late '50s when the company began to use ceramic disc caps, since they often require less restorative work than the



earlier models with paper and oil caps, but plan on having *any* old Valco amp thoroughly checked out for maximum reliability and tone. Valco amps with 6973 output tubes are also high on Terry's list for brilliant overdriven tone,

as found in some of the amps in the Supro 1600 series and some Gretsch 6162 models. We'll soon be reviewing examples from Terry's extensive collection of old Valcos, but you don't have to be an expert on these amps to appreciate their considerable potential – *especially* for recording. And don't let their age be a barrier to entry... you can always send your new old Valco to Terry for the best restoration and tone-shaping work on the planet, and he stocks many of the hard-to-find tubes that were original equipment in Valco amps. **to**

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Talos BASIC AMPLIFIER

with Doug Weisbrod



With so many new amps and new builders popping up, you might assume that whatever can possibly be done with an amplifier circuit has already been

done. Well, not quite... We've chosen to showcase yet another exceptional tool for tone this month – The Talos Basic Studio Reference Amplifier designed and built by Doug Weisbrod, co-founder of Music Technology, Springfield, VA. Our interview with Doug is followed by two reviews from no less than Bill Kirchen and Adrian Legg. Enjoy...

TQR: What's your background, Doug?

In my sophomore year of college I built my first "scratch" amplifier. Me and my best childhood friend, Ron Young, decided to build something unique. We were friends with some older musicians that also were engineers at an old stereo company in California called SAE. They encouraged us to build an amplifier that sounded better than a Marshall, since we were always arguing that Fenders sounded better. This was in about 1976. So Ron and I looked at a number of amplifiers lent to us by friends and we also got our hands on the schematics for several amplifiers. We settled on a blackface Fender Bassman preamp section voiced more for guitar and a modified version of a Fender Twin output section. The amp was really loud, and Ron and I didn't like it unless it was turned all the way up, so we decided to try a Master Volume. I tried several circuits, including the famous stereo pot feeding both sides of the phase inverter, but in the end we used a control right after the Treble control output, and I think we buffered it. We also removed all of the negative feedback and installed a 50 watt switch. I was a big fan of the old tweed TV front Deluxes, and I liked the clarity of a zero feedback design. The SAE guys were impressed, and I used that amplifier throughout college in the late 1970's and after. I never really built another "scratch" amplifier until Bill Thalmann and I designed the Basic around 2001-2002.

After college I worked for the aerospace industry through the late 1980's and finished work on my masters degree in Business at Pepperdine. I moved from California to Virginia in 1994, and during the 1980's and early 1990's I was more focused on music. I got into the 1980's rack gear craze – the big stereo rig –

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and that is when I met Red Rhodes, who was the design engineer at Groove Tubes. I had a Dual Seventy-Five that had blown up under warranty, so I drove it up to the Groove Tubes shop, and there was Red. We maintained a pretty good friendship even after I moved to Virginia, and he is the one who got me interested in building amplifiers again. He was a great man and inventor, and I miss him. He could be a whole other story, including his “Velvet Hammer” pickups...

After moving to Virginia I found that there were few good repair people, so I got the equipment out and started doing repairs again part time. I could not work for large corporations anymore due to let us just say *moral differences*... I had worked for companies like the Enron's and MCI's of the world, and they are all the same. I decided to do repairs full time but soon found that there wasn't enough business in the small town of Front Royal where I was living. I decided that I needed to start a small amp business and pull business from the larger DC area. My wonderful dog Maggie had puppies, and one of the folks that took one happened to be a supplier to Conrad Johnson Design. He told me that I should call Bill Thalmann, their chief design engineer, and tell him about my amplifier ideas. Well, I called CJ and they thought I was applying for a production engineer position, as they had just run an ad. They asked me if I wanted to come in for an interview and I did.

TQR: What inspired the development of the Talos Basic?

Working with Bill at CJ is when I saw the next evolution of guitar amplifiers. While I was there I amassed quite the library of old radio engineering text books. My math background was pretty good, so I just went through them as I had time. At one point I went to Bill Conrad and asked him for some seed money and a division so that I could build a “CJ” style guitar amplifier, but Lou Johnson didn't like the idea. Bill Thalmann had been at CJ for 20 years and was ready for something different, so we



decided to start our own repair business. Washington DC was a very healthy market for such things, and since both of our houses were full of repairs, we had to do something. We started with 1000 square feet, and within a year went to 2500 feet and 3,000 repairs per year. With the repair business settled, we were able to start work on the project that would soon become the Talos Basic.

If you read the RCA Designers Handbook it will say somewhere that “for the greatest fidelity, one should use a Class A, push-pull triode.” This is fact no matter how you do the math, and I have verified this with my ears over the years. “Class A” means the tubes are conducting maximum current all the time, meaning they are *on*, and this means no cross-over notch. *Push-pull* means that you get common mode rejection, or a minimum of harmonic distortion. *Triode* means the use of a tube that employs only a cathode, signal grid and plate. As tubes evolved



from light bulbs to diodes, to triodes, to tetrodes and then to pentodes, the quest from the triode was to produce more power. The triode gives the most true representation of the input signal, however, it ends up being about 40% of the output of the pentode. The pentode employs two more grids that basically pull the electrons toward the plate and minimize “bounce back.” This being said, nothing can be added for a benefit without some compromise. The pentode introduces a “kink” in the response curve which makes them less linear than a triode. The European solution was the KT-66 and KT-88 series, and

the “KT” stands for *kinkless tetrode*. So what is a tetrode? It is a triode with a suppressor grid (connected to the cathode). The fifth pin on a KT series tube is a *beam focusing plate*. It is not a grid, and acts much differently than a screen grid on, let's say, an EL34. A 6V6, 6L6 and 6550 are all *kinkless tetrodes*. They sound very close to a triode without the kink of a pentode. This is why we chose the 6L6 in a push-pull, Class A configuration. We also chose cathode bias for sound and reliability and zero feedback for maximum clarity. We wanted to produce a musical but accurate amplifier – something that would be as much an instrument as the guitar plugged into it.



Since we chose a zero feedback design, we had to carefully choose components and power supply configurations that would be absolutely quiet and very low impedance. This reduces noise and enhances response. Negative feedback is really a band-aid for poor power supply design and cheap parts. When you apply feedback, it sounds like you are putting your hand over your mouth while talking. Negative feedback is necessary in output-transformerless designs as it does one useful thing, which is to lower the source

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impedance of the amplifier to better match the load of the speaker. In designs that use output transformers it is not necessary. We chose a short signal path, as we wanted to maintain the integrity of the instrument being played. Let's face it, the more parts you put between the instrument and the speaker just color the sound. I have several mods I do on other brands of guitar amplifiers where I simply remove parts to make them sound better.

We wanted to get rid of the traditional tone matrix as this design creates phase shift among the frequency bands and creates more noise as this passive network produces a 17db loss requiring a subsequent recovery of the signal. There are plenty of ways to control frequency response at the gain stage level, and that is



what we did. We vary how each of the two stages of the 12AX7 respond to various frequencies by

controlling local feedback and taking advantage of the internal capacitance of each tube (i.e., the Miller effect). But in order to do this we had to have good regulated low impedance supplies.

We are the only musical instrument manufacturer that I am aware of that designs the supplies the way we do. There are some that use "78xx" and "79xx" self-contained regulator chips, but we design and build ours from discrete components for better control over circuit results. All other guitar amplifiers use a "PI" filter which starts by producing a high voltage AC source through a rectifier and then it's cap/resistor cap/resistor. The idea is to slow the electrons down and store them in the capacitor. This configuration is great for the power tubes, since they are first in line; however, the last tube to get its power requirements from this source is the first tube in the signal path. It has to suck its requirements down a teeny weenie straw. Doesn't make sense does it? We fully regulate all supplies so the tubes can drink easily from a big pond. What this does is allow full frequency response at all stages. In traditional amps, designers have to add back lost response which creates more noise. In general, our amplifiers are 90% power supply and 10% signal path.

We build one amplifier, which is the Basic. It is our first product and was released in January 2004. What we do for models is offer the same head in different sounding cabinets. We offer a head and several combo configurations. The combos are made of different woods and tweeters can be added as an option. The



woods are Finland Birch (neutral sound), Pine (piano sound), Redwood (very focused sound the harder you push it)

and Cedar (very smooth). The tweeters are good for acoustic or electrics with piezos. The amplifier is good to 40khz, so it sounds real nice. With the tweets, you don't have to have one amp for your electric and go through the PA with the acoustic. We also designed the Basic with a tri-mode switch which allows the musician to have a 20, 30 or 40 watt amplifier at his or her disposal. The Basic might be expensive, but it replaces the need to own several amplifiers. As a player, I was tired of having to haul a different amplifier around depending on the gig. Some studios have complained that 20 watts is still too loud, so I am working on an upgrade to allow six power modes. They would be 6, 12, 18, 20, 30, 40. Most studios have commented that the Basic can cover much sonic ground, from an old tweed Deluxe to a Marshall, to way beyond. The amp can really do all styles, from jazz to rockabilly to rock & roll.

After we had a working prototype, a good friend of mine (JT of JT Saddles) introduced me to Bill Kirchen. He wanted Bill to try one of our amplifiers. Over the years Bill had been given many amps to try, but nothing could beat his blackface Deluxe. He was skeptical, but after he had the amplifier for a few weeks he was ready to make the Basic his regular amp. Bill Kirchen played the amplifier for most of 2002-2003 and we made changes based on his road experience. We improved the controls and the stage response. We even designed the Combo at his request as he had originally been given a head and cabinet. We designed the combo for maximum frequency response within the parameters of Southwest Airlines Baggage Check-In guide lines. This allows Bill to check it in a roadcase.

We also had Bill Holter (a local DC musician and vintage dealer) take one out since he is a "vintage snob" and we had to be able to please him. Bill Holter focused on some details of note ghosting which caused us to relocate the cathode resistor for the power tubes and re-engineer the phase inverter for better note balance. Thanks to both Bill Kirchen and Bill Holter. I am glad to have them as friends. In January 2004 we were ready to go to production.

Our speaker choice is definitely the Jensen NEO 100. It is the best sounding 12 inch speaker for guitar I have ever heard. Why? Mainly because it is efficient, very flat out to 5K, tapers



off in high frequency response far slower than a Vintage 30, so the NEO is clearer, it has a resonant frequency of 70hz so it is good and solid

down low, and it is light. With the Neo in a Pine cabinet the total weight is 37 pounds! We tried Jensen Mods, C12N's and the NEOS. We also tried the Vintage 30's. I am a bit of a scientist sometimes, so I listened first and then measured the response of each speaker with a spectrum analyzer. I like flat speakers and why not? Most of the Eminence speakers created peaks in the mid-range, so we did not use them. The Jensen Mod was OK, but still not flat. The C12N has a resonant frequency of 117 hz and a big response peak at 15khz – loose lows and artificially bright. The Vintage 30 was close to the NEO but it was less efficient and a bit muddy in comparison. It was also heavy.

After we chose the NEO, we had some initial problems with it that were caused in production. Jensen was using a C12N basket and stamping out the back to accommodate the NEO magnet structure. The basket was bending, which was causing some coil alignment problems and some very nasty buzzing. I called CE Distribution (the importer) and they got right on it. I was very nervous at first because I wanted that speaker to work, and the Celestion Neodymium speaker was no comparison, but we fixed the problem with the Jensen.



I use Ruby 6L6MSTR power tubes because, in my opinion, they are the best. I have used the “Winged C” which is dark while the Ruby 6L6 MSTR is very

balanced and clear. It sounds better than any new production or NOS tubes I have heard in my 48 years. I use Ruby 12AX7's and 12AT7's, and I have also used JJ 12AX7's and 12AT7's, which are not as linear and produce a softer sound.

Our transformers are custom. The power transformer is pretty straight forward, and we use an off-the-shelf Magic Parts choke.

The power transformer was designed specifically for Class A push-pull operation *only* with a 6L6. There are a lot of amps being built that allow the use of any power tube in existence, but that is a design compromise. If you want to get the most from a tube, a transformer must be designed specifically for it.

We also used high inductance alloys, which are more expensive and lighter than 4% silicone steel, which is what every one else uses. We wanted light, but not at the expense of transfer efficiency. This output transformer is also critical in determining the power level at which the output section begins to saturate. We wanted the amplifier to be controlled from the guitar, so we wanted full, clean volume at ‘5’ on the guitar, and to begin to clip from there with no increase in volume. The amplifier can be driven to full power at 0 db, and from there it's driven into class A2 where it starts to draw grid current. Even though the Basic is driving the output tubes pretty hard, we have never had a tube light up in it, and we designed for that.

Our cabinets are constructed by the best cabinet maker in the world – Dave Buffmire of Chattfield Sound. We use dove-tail construction on all cabinets except the Birch ply, for chipping reasons, but all are solidly built. They are also built deep for bass recovery. All the cabinets are available in the Basic Black or in any custom color... and I mean *any* custom color. All the

cabinets are built entirely of the specified wood, including the



baffle, except the baffle cover and the rear panels unless specified. As I stated earlier, the woods used are Finland Birch plywood, Redwood, Cedar, and Southern White Pine.

We didn't invent the use of woods normally used as guitar tops or piano sound boards as speaker cabinet materials... I remember some folks doing this in the '70s, but they were 'speaker guys' building cabinets only. If I have learned anything it is that stand-alone cabinets are an evil in this industry. Consumers don't really understand that the cost to build a 1x12 and a 4x12 is virtually the same. The materials are not much different; it is all in the labor to build the box. So consumers figure that a 4x12 *should* cost \$900 and a 1x12 should cost \$300. We couldn't afford to offer stand alone cabinets made of these woods since we couldn't make any money doing it. But we are lucky to be able to offer them as optional combo cabinet wood as they do add another dimension to the sound.

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The sound of the BASIC is the result of blending hi-fi and guitar amplifier sonic signatures. We just didn't throw a bunch of

expensive parts at an old design and call it a new product – we took a new look at the design from the ground up. The Basic interface is simple, but its sound palette is diverse. It was never meant to sound like any other amplifier, but if I had to describe it I would say that it captures some of the best sounds of early Fenders and Marshalls and then does way more.

TQR: What's ahead?

We are working on a 1000 watt bass amplifier that will be light, have a similar approach to tone shaping as the Basic, but sound like no other. It will use a tube front end and a solid state output. The output section will be 'smart,' as it will look at the input to the amplifier section and switch the power section to reduce dead time and increase efficiency.

We are also working on a stereo 2x12 version of the Basic, and it will have independent reverb. The reverb input will be the speaker output of the guitar amplifier. The reverb section will have its own amp and speakers, but be contained in the same enclosure. Also, we have designed a 12 watt single ended guitar amplifier. We have a prototype, and have been asked to build some. We are also going to build a 20/40 watt single ended amplifier for guitar intended for stage use. Again, all tube. A bass preamp is in the making as well. Bill Thalmann is also designing a keyboard amplifier system for stage performance. The Basic is a good bass amp if you like the old Ampeg Portaflex. It sounds wonderful with pedal steel, resonators, violins... you name it. **to**

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Talos BASIC REVIEW

with Adrian Legg

I have experience of the *je ne sais quoi* with which tubes can tickle tone into life – direct A/B too, blindly being flicked in and out of tube preamps d.i. in a studio and choosing the unquantifiable tickle every time, but however often they parade the saints' bones around the village, I am not of the faith.



Chickens remain healthily unslaughtered, the goat is safe, and I will not go on the road carrying tube amps to placate the gods of distortion, probably because distortion and polyphony are uncomfortable companions, and I want to play several notes at once. In the pub bands of yore I never used my Twin much over halfway drunk, and though I remember the time when extra features were first introduced and guitarists

went around music stores hopefully pulling the knobs off display amps in case there was a push-pull switch there. I never even had a master volume. Nope, if I want distortion, I can afford the batteries. I'm not giving up a seat in the car to it, and if we want an electric and tube sound on an album, I'm happy to take my little Trace Velocette along even if we do end up not using that take.

I'm not sure I can articulate what "good tone" means to me beyond my having some kind of visceral electro-magnet that suddenly switches on in response to it, but while wandering the sonic chaos of NAMM aimlessly in my down-time, Bill Kirchen put a couple of notes through a Talos combo with his thoroughly unhygienic Tele, and the magnet pulled me back the next day with my own guitar to see if they were real. They were, and



everything I did on my guitar, the Talos did – faithfully, responsively, and with nuances so clear and precise I had to take a small Arkansas stone to my nails. Using a magnetic pick-up

near the bridge, I got all the way through a steel licks bends piece without missing the reverb or my compressor.

Back home in London, I made a small excursion to pick up a Talos "The Basic" head that Bill had left over here. In the absence of a Talos cabinet, I've got it plugged into a 15" PD152 and high frequency driver trapezoidal cab that used to do duty as part of a pub slugger p.a... It's ugly, but I'm used to it. The first thing I noticed, during a morning tea and idle noodle session, was that notes on my stage guitar left to hang and die

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away did so in the amp exactly the same way they did on the guitar, and into an unusual quiet. Notes seemed to exist in an alive space that was intently responding to everything that came out of the guitar. When I tried it with Graphtech piezos, so clear and uncoloured was it that I fished out my Creedy parlour size and plugged its Dimarzio piezo in. Voila! There was the Creedy coming out of the speaker, clear and clean, no flaky skin dryness, no nasty little resonances threatening, no sizzling or spitting – just the Creedy, and a tiny scratch on my index nail.



Given an appropriate speaker, the Talos works very well as an acoustic amp. Even

though I still wince at the oxymoron, I was in at the start of the Trace Acoustic, and much though it did for me then, whatever one plugs in it sounds like a Trace Acoustic.

With the Talos, I found I needed some high end roll-off in pentode mode to tame the high frequency driver, but other than that, nothing – no parametric tweaks, and this with a simple piezo bug I just stuck in for the hell of it. As an electric amp, it has clarity, the tickle, the je ne sais quoi in buckets, and an unquestioning devotion to delivering the note and tone you give it. If you like to colour in your own pictures, this could save a lot of rubbing out before you start. **To**

www.adrianlegg.com

Bill Kirchen



© Amy C. Elliot

I've used a Talos amplifier exclusively since 2002, in everything from big outdoor venues to crowded honky-tonks. Of all the amps I've used in the last 35 plus years, I believe the Talos delivers far and away the best sounds in the widest range of situations.

The tri-mode switch is a tremendously useful feature. It tailors the power to

the stage and hall size, and also lets me switch, for instance,



from triode to ultra-linear to get more clean oomph and definition in a finger-picked passage, then

back to triode for a fatter sound. This amp has a wonderful range of tone, from a transparent clean sound to a very musical overdrive, then all the way on out to a full gnarly distortion. It amazes me what a big, fat sound I can get, yet still play whole chords with the third in 'em and have it not all turn to mush. I know the phrase "smooth distortion" is over-used, but I can't find a better way to describe it.

It took some real convincing to lure me away from a long fruitful run of Fender amps, starting with a '50s tweed full-power Twin that I got from Dan Erlewine in 1966, and on through tweed and black face Deluxes, Twins, a Pro, a Vibroluxe, a Vibro-King, plus a whole host of modern amps and some very nice boutique models. I've used the same Telecaster almost exclusively for over a third of a century, the last dozen or so years with Barden pickups, and often with little or no outboard processing. This has let me really hear the differences in response and tone from one amp to another. Finally, the best testimonial I can give is in my playing, which I believe this amp has measurably improved. I have access to a wider spectrum of guitar at any given time, because the tone is so consistent over the whole range, bottom to top. Also, there is so much available clean sustain, I find I play less notes and more melody. The amp doesn't sag at inopportune times, so I don't have to fill up the air with riffs because the notes are decaying prematurely. When it is time to rip out some fast stuff, the Talos holds up and delivers.

The Talos is my favorite amp to date. It's the most musical and versatile and requires the least compromises, which brings me a



Doug, Adrian & Bill

big step closer to being able to deliver the sounds I hear in my head. Did I mention it rocks? **To**

Peace & twang,
Bill Kirchen

www.billkirchen.com

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