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London calling...

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the ToneQuest Report™

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone
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London Calling

For some, fortune in life is given, for others it can be taken away, and some of us wander with uncertainty into what becomes our destiny. Consider where you are now in life – your home, work, family and friends. Tracing our steps back in time, we can all point to a mere handful of decisions and events that have largely shaped and determined where we are today and the people we find in our lives. Whether these events were random or pre-ordained is up to you to decide, but the degree to which minor decisions and events lead to major milestones in life is no less certain, fated or not.

It is fair to say that more guitar amplifiers are being built today by industrious tone hounds than ever before. There are more straightforward and ordinary ways to make a living, which is to say



that most of these builders are driven by the need to design and build something of substance – concrete, lasting and real. Accountants surely derive no such enjoyment from their work. You'll never see a financial spreadsheet mounted and displayed in a gilded frame in an accounting hall

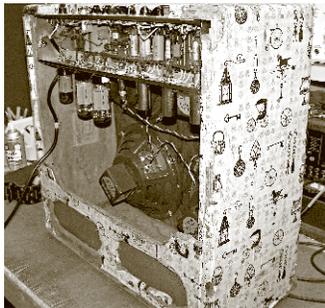
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of fame... At some point, most builders deliberately set out to become builders, so it is rare indeed to hear of one who seems to have been chosen to pursue his line of work, whether by fate or chance. Jesse Hoff, a guitar player in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina simply wanted his old 5E3 tweed Deluxe to hold its own on stage with a band. Little did he know that in doing so, his life would change in ways he could never have imagined...



The current popularity of the 5E3 tweed Deluxe is a comparatively recent phenomenon when considering the landscape of guitar amplification spanning the '50s to today. The Deluxe was originally

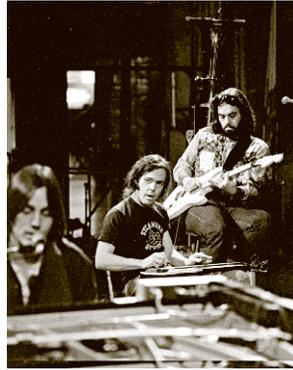
one of the more economical models within the narrow panel Fender line, possessing neither the power, volume or headroom needed by guitarists working increasingly large stages with the big western swing bands of the era. For those gigs you needed a Bassman or Twin, which is precisely why Leo built them. By the '60s Fender tweed amps were largely viewed by rockers as obsolete relics – underpowered when compared to the bigger blonde, brown and blackface Fender amps, and the tweed look was woefully outdated. When you can find a Fender tweed amp that has been painted black (and many were) they can be terrific bargains. Buddy Guy's original Bassman was recovered in tacky kitchen contact paper (even better), and our '58 Tremolux was acquired with a stripped original cabinet painted with a transparent milk chocolate vomit stain for under \$700 on eBay. Thanks to Greg Hopkins at Vintage Amp Restoration, you could mistake it for original today.



Aside from David Lindley ripping it up with tweed Deluxes loaded with original Celestion/Vox silver Alnico G12 speakers on recordings, the Deluxe really didn't attain popularity again until the swingin' blues explosion of the '80s, and even then they could

only be used in smaller bars and clubs. Of course, Neil Young has used the same Deluxe on recordings and miked on arena stages for decades, but Neil is an aberrant humanoid on many levels... During the early to mid '90s the concept of booteek amps gained momentum with Andy Marshall's THD replica Bassman, the Matchless DC-30, and Fender's introduction of the 3x10 60 watt Vibro-King. Volume and power still ruled over the club-friendly tones and limited headroom of 20 watt

combo amps, but this was about to change...



How and why have small 20 watt (and lower) amplifiers achieved such popularity today? Certainly volume levels have come down on stage and in recording studios in favor of fidelity. Granted, most of the Layla album was recorded with tweed Champs, but like Neil Young's use of a tweed Deluxe, this was a rare exception. More recently,

bands and sound crews have discovered that lower stage volume eliminates a host of bleed and isolation problems while producing better sound for the audience. Get a studio-quality mix on stage and let the sound system provide the volume... The boutique amp market has also been supported by players and collectors who seldom play out, and for them, 20 watts may still be too much, hence the appearance of master volume and switchable power levels in small combos that can be set as low as 1/4 watt. Given the ability of the Deluxe to quickly reach a rich, saturated level of natural output tube distortion, the 5E3 circuit provides volume-sensitive guitarists today with the overdriven tones they crave and no pain. The same can be said for the typical dual EL-84 18 watt Marshall circuit... For players that want the sound of a cranked amp without the decibel levels of a big rig, 20 watts can work – and more specifically a 5E3 Deluxe can work, but with some very real limitations – loose and flubby low end, sag, compression, limited volume, headroom and EQ control. For certain types of live music, however, such shortcomings are completely irrelevant. Loose, sagging and busted up can be perfectly authentic for Delta and Chicago blues, certain styles of what we might term 'jangly west coast rock,' slide and harp, and in the more forgiving setting of a recording studio the Deluxe can cover a lot of ground... In many live situations, however, it can also quickly disappear on stage.



We are hardly the first to have noticed this, and among those that have is Jesse Hoff, founder of Lazy J Projects based in London. Born in Germany, Jesse has also lived in

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, but London serendipitously provided the opportunities to take his work with musicians to a more professional level. At that time, he was designing custom power supplies, reverb modules, attenuators, switch-

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ing systems, boost and overdrive effects, and modifications for vintage Fuzz Faces, Tube Screamers, Rat pedals and Dallas Rangemasters – basically whatever a guitarist needed that couldn't be bought off the shelf. Hoff never harbored any thoughts of building his own amplifiers, but he built a copy of his own modified 5E3 Deluxe, which was eventually reviewed in *Guitar & Bass* magazine by a writer known for his steadfast belief that classic vintage amplifiers generally provide stark tonal advantages that are seldom if ever duplicated by modern amplifiers or replicas. His stellar review ignited an interest and demand for Jesse Hoff's Lazy J 20 that has grown to a 20 week wait. To his credit, Hoff continues to personally build each amplifier on his bench in London, and he now also builds 40 watt and 80 watt models by special order in addition to the original Lazy J 20. Hoff's story is a fascinating study in how the demand for quality can unexpectedly change and validate a life seemingly overnight. Enjoy...

TQR: How did this all begin for you, Jesse?

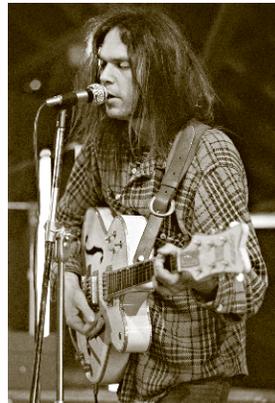


I always wanted to know how things worked, and a lot of it had to do with being bored in the winter in South Carolina when there weren't many gigs. It probably started with pedals back in the '70s when I would build little

boosters for people. I learned a lot from books but also from older Ham radio guys who were familiar with tube circuits. I lived in Myrtle Beach but graduated from high school in Germany, and it was around this time that I really started to become seriously interested in music and being a musician. I also did an apprenticeship for a while at a radio and TV repair shop in Germany, which furthered my interest in electronics. I had messed around with pedals and maintained amps for friends, but I had never entertained the thought of actually building amps. Fast forwarding through the late '70s and '80s to the early '90s, I'd moved to England from Germany,



and then back to South Carolina with the goal of playing music, and that's essentially what I did for years and years. My early influences came from Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the Stones, and Neil Young's solo work. I had a keen appreciation of harmonies and how the

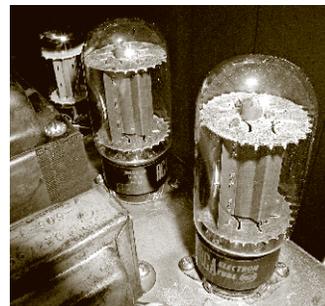


acoustic blended with electric guitars. Further on I got into blues and southern rock. One of the bands I really didn't like as much because I thought they were too pop-oriented or something was Credence. I guess I just didn't get it, and now I know every song they ever did and just love them. Your tastes change, and the simplicity of a 3 or 4 piece band really can rock in a very unique and special way. I still listen to Neil Young's early music that he has put out in his archives for that unique blend of acoustic and electric guitar tones.

TQR: It's always interesting to understand a builder's tastes and how they can provide a clue to the sounds they like to chase...

The funny thing is that none of this actually happened as a result of me wanting it... I certainly didn't plan for this. I'm incredibly grateful, but it was never my goal to build and sell amps for a living. At some point in the '90s I started fixing amps on the side, but my main thing was music... What's fascinating is that the first Lazy J amp that started this in late 2008 is a copy of a modified tweed Deluxe I still have in the States.

TQR: And how did you modify it? What did you want to accomplish?



Any tweed Deluxe I've ever heard is great as long as you are playing in a room alone with them or in a very controlled and disciplined environment, but as soon as you are in a live environment they can just go away. Playing the first set was great, but as

the band got louder I found myself struggling to hear it, and if I turned it up it just became more distorted. So the whole time I was thinking, "How can I make this amp bolder, bigger and more present with more volume?" I put 6L6s in it with a GZ34 rectifier, and a fan, and I also changed the speaker, which was very important. We're blessed in a sense that we have Nomex now for voice coils. Kapton can take more heat, but there is a definite sound to it that I don't care for as much, and certainly not in low powered amps. I had played around with the voltages in other amps before and studied how one thing affects another. When the reissue Bassman first came out, the voltages were all over the place, and it's so important.

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They really didn't sound like an old tweed Bassman.

The tweed Deluxe has a very spongy power supply that results in a very subtle, organic compression even at low volume levels. There is sag in it that allows the harmonics to come up and bloom, and the power transformer has a huge role in affecting this. I experimented with different transformers and more efficient iron and it ruined the sound of the amp. It became really snappy and the harmonics were lost, which was very interesting to me. So I looked at the power supply and the preamp, and the relationship to the phase inverter and the stages preceding it. I bumped up the power supply, gave it an extra stage of filtering and bumped up the preamp voltages, among other things.

TQR: It sounds as if you spent a lot of time thinking about the transformer.



Yeah, when I built the first copy of my amp in Myrtle Beach I lucked out. Once I started building I experimented with the transformer and I discovered that I had gotten it right the first time. All the other transformers I tried to beef up the power supply took something away. I had to give the amp increased heater capacity because it runs hot with 6L6s, which is also why I included a fan. The transformer I use is made by Heyboer.

TQR: Did you stick with the stock output transformer?

Yeah, it's a regular sized Tweed Deluxe style output transformer, but here, using better steel is a good thing. The quality and physical size of the output transformer certainly have a special effect. But what blew me away was how much the power transformer influenced the sound, even if you keep all the windings the same and just change the steel. Everything affects everything. You can hear a really tight sound with one type, and with another it will cave in because the voltages



drop in a very organic way and it acts like a little compressor. The importance of the inefficiency in the steel used for the power transformer amazed me. I'm working on a new design now for a more British type of amp, and the prototype, while it's sounds terrific, sounds to me as if it has too much

focus on the fundamental and not enough harmonics. I don't want to lose the punch of the fundamental on attack, because it really has something, but more of the harmonics need to come out. I don't really approach this from a technical point of view, but from that of a musician. I want to feel that experience of having the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

TQR: So how did the sound of your copy of the Deluxe you had modified spread and get around?

Towards the end of the '90s I'd started to drift back over to London from time to time, so when I was there, I put an ad in a paper called Loot. They sold refrigerators and cars and everything else, and the music section was quite large. Everybody was looking for a deal there, rich or poor, famous and not. I ran an ad for a month or two for amp repair and from that one ad I got really busy. Quite by chance, some of the people that called me were very active in the London music scene, and one of them was Terry Britten, a songwriter who co-wrote "What's Love Got to Do With It," among other hits for artists like Cliff Richard, Michael Jackson, and many others. I did some work for him, fixing up a lot of the amps in his studio. Years later, Terry would help me get a job at Chandler's Guitars, fixing amps and modifying them, while working for myself as well.

After the millennium, I spent the next few years dividing my time between London and South Carolina, literally spending half the year in London, and the other half in Myrtle Beach, still playing music and fixing amps. Somehow, that's when Lazy J Projects began, because I wasn't building amps, but all kinds of interesting projects – switching systems, different kinds of pedals, whatever anyone would need.

When in London I was working at Chandler's part time, two or three days a week, and working for myself, and from that I met more people in the London music scene. Importantly, one guy was Phil Harris, who writes the vintage column for Guitar and Bass. He has a vintage equipment rental company called Harris Hire, and in his opinion the vintage gear he reviewed always beat the more contemporary alternatives. About four years ago I was really in a bad state, reeling from



a bad investment I had made in a restaurant venture in South Carolina, and the guitar player in a popular band here called Nine Below Zero asked if he could borrow the amp I had built that was a copy of my modified Deluxe. At the same time I let Phil Harris hear it, and

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he eventually wrote a really nice article about it in *Guitar & Bass* magazine, which really helped to draw attention to Lazy J. Meanwhile, Nine Below Zero used the amp to record 'It's Never Too Late', and the editor of *Guitarist* magazine happened to be there in the studio and he called to tell me he wanted to review the amp. At that point, the amp didn't even have a badge on it.

Once the reviews came out in the magazines, it really put Lazy J on the map. The J20 won 'Amp of the Year,' then the J80 and J40 followed. That was the very beginning of the Lazy J amps, then, within a year Alan Rogan, who has been Pete Townshend's tech since the '70s showed a J20 to Pete, then to Joe Walsh and Mike Campbell, and they all bought one. That just blew my mind. I'll never be able to properly express my gratitude to Alan for that...

TQR: When you began to get all this attention, did you have to make any changes as far as your work space arrangement?

It's still the way it was then. I converted one of the bedrooms here in the house into my shop, and I'm still working here. Sometimes I think it would be nice to get out of the house with a separate space, but I'm still building amps one at a time as I get an order.

TQR: Expanding production would demand that you relinquish a certain amount of control or entrust it to someone else. There is a certain amount of risk there.



And I think about this a lot... After so many years you can forget about going on vacation because you just have to keep moving on and not let

the business slow down, yet on a personal level, certain things suffer. You can sometimes feel like you're coming apart a little bit working so much, and you begin to question what you want from your life.

TQR: Well, now it seems to be paying off. Of course we had never seen one of your amps until our generous subscriber, Hugh McCloy, offered to have his amp sent to us first when you shipped it from London. Opening the box gave us a big smile when we saw the beautifully lacquered, deep amber cabinet. It makes quite a statement.



Thanks. I used to do it myself, and it's based on my old Deluxe that I found in a pawn shop in Conway, South

Carolina. The color is so amber. You know how you see some old tweed amps that are too well-preserved and look almost anemic? I loved the look of my old one, so that's what I was aiming for. Initially, I built the cabs myself, getting really into the carpentry of it, making the finger joints and everything. It was this perfect little world of working on the electronics and getting bogged down with that, and then going into the carport and smelling the pine and wearing this other hat. I probably built the first 30 or so cabs myself, and I loved it. Then, as things got busier, I had to make certain changes. The cabs are done by Mojo now, but I still hand-lacquered them for years because when you're busy doing a million other things you don't want to take the time to ship test cabinets back and forth to get it right. But we finally did get it right, and the first time I received a finished cab it meant that I could just get busy and put a chassis in it.

TQR: It's flawless, and your design in which you mount the tube reverb and tremolo modules inside the cab on both sides is very clever and well done.



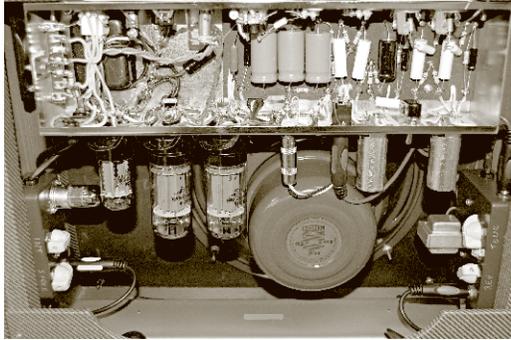
I started building modules like that back in the '90s, and I knew that they would

have to be dark brown like the faceplate on an old Fender with creme knobs – my favorite Fender look. I never did put reverb in my old Deluxe, but as soon as I started building the Lazy J 20 I knew I wanted to because I had done it for other amps before, and it really worked. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, but it took a while to design it to fit. There is a lot of stuff in the reverb module (laughing).

TQR: What kind of design did you use for the tremolo?

It's a bias modulating tremolo, and it took me awhile to get it to sound the way I wanted. It's super-imposed onto the bias, turning the output tubes off and on more. Of course, with a cathode biased amp, the moment that you try to turn the tube on more, the current that the tube is trying to draw is drawing across the cathode resistor and that immediately holds the

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bias back again. So instantly it has its own mechanism that resists

being turned on. It took awhile to come up with certain circuit values to make it the best it could be, using a buffer stage between the oscillator and the amp. That same tremolo in the fixed bias Lazy J 40 is much more efficient and defined... so much so that I had to modify it to compensate. Doing any kind of A/B tests is exciting, but also draining. I remember making this chart of my impressions when I was changing values in the three phase shift stages. You can work this all out mathematically, but in the end none of that matters. What matters is how it sounds. Fortunately I have people very near by that I absolutely respect who I can run things by. After so much testing, at some point you need input. I had a customer that wanted exactly half of a J80 – half the power, half the weight and with just one speaker. I started out wondering how I was going to do it, and when I had it built, I really felt that there was some real potential there. Very quickly, I was able to acquire an extensive library of references from listening sessions I did with these pro players whose opinions I trust. Their input is invaluable, and that amp became the J40.

TQR: We get dismayed sometimes because amp builders seem to have largely forsaken designs with any degree of clean headroom, as if overdriven tones are all you could possibly want from an electric guitar.



I think that probably comes from the old quest for a turned up sound, and in a way it's a good thing that so much atten-

tion has been paid to getting that sound at a lower volume. But I agree, the trick has to be the balancing act between a great clean sound and the transition into drive from there. I like lower-powered speakers. The thing is, the moment you make a bigger amp (and thereby giving it the potential for a louder clean sound), you're confined to using more than one speaker, or a higher powered speaker with a Kapton voice coil. Those things all make a big difference. There is

something in the response of a Nomex speaker that is quick and it picks up transients very well, where a Kapton voice coil seems more sluggish and it has more low end for some reason. With the J40 1x12 I was confined to using a high-powered speaker. I did a lot of tweaking to accommodate the speaker choice, and it works great. Since then I've been building a 2x12 J40, just so I could use low-powered speakers. The effect on the amp is amazing, and it makes the clean tones more exciting. There's a definite tone to that, but then again, there is something awesome about the single speaker design, too – more drive, which is generated in the speaker. So the two amps, even though they share an identical chassis, occupy their own space.

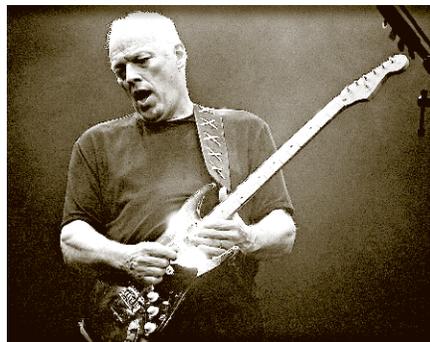
TQR: When people are on your web site they would probably assume that the J80 is a tweed Twin.



Yeah, Phil Harris asked for that amp specifically and he wanted a tweed Twin. I started

messing with the circuit as well because I thought it could be more responsive and livelier. Phil has an original, of course, and when we compared it I thought it did one thing really well but it doesn't do a lot of things very well. I came up with a way to knock the power down if you wish with a mixed bias arrangement, and a couple of push/pull pots that scoop the mids out more and boost gain, and a fully adjustable negative feedback loop. I just wanted it to be more versatile and still have the true tone of a tweed Twin. I certainly don't feel like I'm doing things better or smarter than all the people that built these great amps that have come before, but (to paraphrase Newton) because we are standing on their shoulders, perhaps we can see a little farther. We get to develop ideas further. In most things I do, I feel like I'm tipping my hat to them.

TQR: What do players tell you they want?



Well, I didn't really build the Lazy J amps at their direction or by their request. The J40 is a notable exception, in that it started as a custom order for half of a

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J80. But typically, it's more like they hear what I have built and like it. Of course, within the scope of an amp model, there are variables that I discuss with each individual player, if necessary tweaking an amp to suit a certain style better. Joe Bonamassa has been very kind and made the comment that he liked the fact that he didn't have to turn the treble down on my amps. David Gilmour has a couple of J20s, and Phil Taylor, who has been with him since the '70s, mentioned to me that David has said how much he liked them. According to Phil he rarely says anything about anything, so I guess that was a validation.

TQR: Let's talk about the Lazy J Cruiser boost pedal.



The only other drive pedals I had at the time were a Tube Screamer, and an old Electro-Harmonix booster. I loved that pedal because it made

the amp sound so much bigger driving the input of the amp, while the Tube Screamer seemed to make everything sound smaller. I would lose all the bottom end, all the weight and it got all middy. I knew that I liked boosters, but they made everything very loud. Right about that time the Klon came out, I saw David Grissom using one and I loved his sound. When I came across him everything changed. I was too young to remember when Kennedy was shot, but I know where I was when I heard that Storyville had broken up (laughing). So when I heard Grissom I decided I needed a Klon, but you couldn't get one because he was back-ordered, so I decided to build a booster that became the Cruiser. The idea was to build a booster that would not necessarily be too loud... I wanted it to start as a clean boost, and then very gradually have the ability to dirty up the boost – to help the amp along a bit. I built the first one in an empty Electro-Harmonix Switchblade case. It worked for what I needed, but the effect was so gradual that



I could set it just about anywhere. Eventually I found a used Klon in New York, and I took it back to South Carolina and played a gig and I couldn't get

along with it. The Cruiser was warmer. You know how your amp sounds when it is turned up too loud and it isn't blending with the band? The Klon had some of that where I always felt like I could hear it too much. The first Cruisers I made didn't have a name and there were no graphics on the box, but the

essence of it is very similar to the nicer ones I build today. Initially it only had one switch with Drive and Saturation. The Deuce Cruiser I sent you has a switch for both, and of course it's brown with cream knobs...

TQR: How do the controls work?



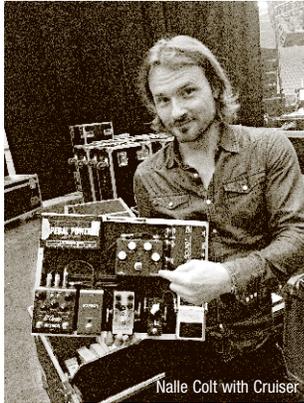
You have three gain stages – an input and an output stage, and between those two you generate the boost. You set the Gain at the first stage with the control. That goes to the output gain

stage, and if you turn the gain control down you can still get a nice clean boost just from the output stage. When you kick in the Drive switch, it actually takes the input gain and diverts it into another gain stage. The Drive knob controls how much signal you let into the drive stage, and the saturation control determines how much you let out. The mini toggle switch gives you a mixture of different clipping options. On the down setting you have a mix of germanium and silicone diodes for the most compressed sound, mosfet clipping when the switch is up, and in the middle there is no clipping whatsoever. With the J20 I personally prefer to take the clipping out altogether because the amp compresses well on its own. The funny thing is that I really questioned what was wrong with me because I couldn't get along with the Klon, and it bothered me for a long time. What I wanted from the Cruiser was simply more of what I already had, and like the Klon, it works best with an amp that is a little on the edge rather than being set clean. Otherwise you wind up with 100% solid state distortion which doesn't sound very good. It's a simple pedal to use because when you're amp is cooking a bit, all you have to do is kick it in and it gives you more of what you already had.

TQR: We'll review it. The trick is to get the sound and feel across to the readers in words, and perhaps make them feel enthused and hopeful that among all the boost pedals new and old that exist, this one might indeed be the shit... It's tough to do sometimes, but we've resisted using narrow sound clips as an enticement for obvious reasons.

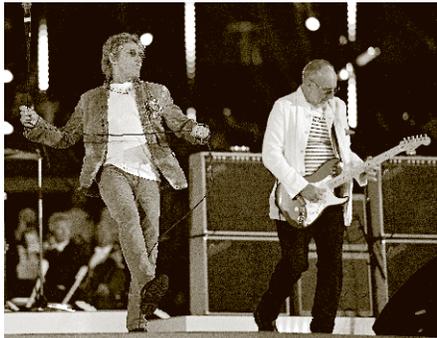
Yeah, that's my big thing, too... sound clips. I mean, since my amps are not available in stores, how do I give people an impression of what they might expect from them? People always talk about sound clips and I've always thought I didn't want to put them on the web site because they seem like... such a sham. I mean, think about it. You have an amp that you have really thought long and hard about getting right and

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you chose the right speaker and now you record that in MP3 quality and it's played through a little 2-inch speaker on a computer and what is that exactly gonna represent? I did put a few clips up on a My Space site, and I understand that people do like to listen to things. Since I don't sell through stores there is no other point of refer-

ence. When your reader Hugh McCloy contacted me about getting an amp, he had never actually played one. It's a big leap of faith to send somebody you've never met a deposit in another country, and you don't really know if you will like it. You *hope* you will... Fortunately there is a lot of reference material out there from reviews that can give you some assurance, but I do appreciate the fact that everyone who has bought an amp has gone through the same uncertainty to some extent. I do try to make myself available to everyone through e-mail, Skype or the phone, because if someone has a question I want to address it. It's the one part that I have always really enjoyed about the music business anyway – the people. I enjoy meeting and talking to people and finding



out about what they are doing and their background. In that sense I seem to have found this perfect little niche for myself. I didn't know much going

in when people began to contact me about making them an amp – I didn't have any idea how to *be* an amp company, but then something really cool happened – people kept calling and asking me to build them an amp, and I realized that maybe I wouldn't need stores. It was brilliant, man... People were coming directly to me, because they wanted to talk to me and they didn't want to deal with someone in the middle. It was such a revelation... How lucky am I? I still get to be me and do something I truly love.

Lazy Z Review

The Lazy J 20 is one of those rare objects that creates an immediate and lasting attachment merely on visual style points alone. When you pull yours out of the box, expect to



be comforted and assured with a warm glow of reverent admiration for the workmanship, style and design. Jesse Hoff's vision is abundantly on display, from the

candy-coated look of the amber lacquered tweed and finished cabinet interior, to the design of the reverb and tremolo modules that present the compact appearance of custom pedals painted in vintage Fender brown face contrasting with vintage creme knobs. Top shelf, man. The Lazy J version of the 5E3 tweed Deluxe perfectly suits the tastes of the times, lightweight and compact, loaded with essential



features, yet unburdened by questionable gizmos that might have been added by someone trying a bit too hard to be cool and unique. The

dual inputs for the bright and normal channels, volume controls and single tone control are familiar enough, but the knob labeled Ground (optional) functions as a Variable Attenuation Control that can take the amp down to about 5 watts with little change in the tone of the amp. Obviously, 5 watts doesn't quite sound or kick like 20, but this feature is available for those who wish to limit volume and still get the character of the amp cranked, and it does this well. Like a stock Deluxe, the #1 inputs produce more gain, and the volume controls are interactive, meaning that when you are plugged into either the normal or bright channel, turning the volume up on the unused channel colors the tone slightly. The optional reverb in the Lazy J is tube driven with Level and Tone controls on the module mounted inside



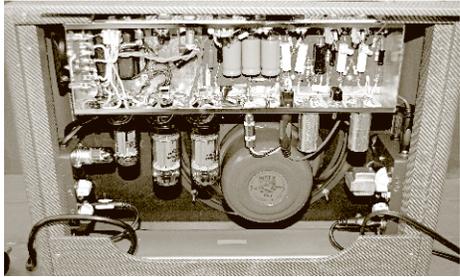
the cabinet, and an additional Level control on the footswitch.

The spring reverb is classic Fender, but the Level control isn't so abrupt that it launches Dick Dale surf tones on '2', and the Tone control nicely colors

the effect. The tremolo is equally fine, producing a smooth and breathy throb with a full range of desirable speeds.

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Tone



Having run our '59 tweed Deluxe with 6L6s from the first day it arrived, we felt familiar with the direction Jesse

Hoff had headed with his modified 5E3 design. As described, his amp offers a bigger sound with more perceived cutting power, volume, better low end response, and enhanced clarity and harmonic detail that are better defined and clearer than those of an old Deluxe running on 6V6s. At higher volume levels the Lazy J stops short of becoming the gnarly, eat-your-face gain monster typical of our '59, and this is a good thing, since it isn't a place most players would go often, if at all. Hoff's amp is indeed more versatile, revealing a sophisticated and complex voice void of the trashy overtones that the smaller tweeds can often produce even at moderate volume levels. *Bigger, louder, clearer* is good, and while the Lazy J compresses like a tweed amp should, it does so with more clarity, sparkle, definition and finesse. The Celestion Alnico G12 blue helps in this regard. The notes seem to jump and pop off the cone rather than landing heavy and flat. You can hear and feel a dynamic response to pick attack with the Celestion, where such dynamic character can easily be lost or missing altogether with higher-powered speakers. Most significant perhaps is the dynamic character of the Lazy J itself. The amp really doesn't seem to get tremendously louder above 5-6, where its overdriven tone remains moderately edgy, but the amp is extremely responsive to pick attack in the style of our '52 National. A lighter touch produces cleaner tones, dig in and the amp responds with more sag, bloom, compression and drive. Unlike a stock Deluxe, however, the Lazy J holds together, rather than succumbing to extreme levels of compression and folding up. We have accomplished a similar bigger, bolder sound and voice when using 6L6s in our '66 Deluxe Reverb, and most recently, when switching from 6V6s to 5881s in an amp just acquired that you'll be reading about soon – a 1956 Gibson GA20.



As much as we admire the sound and design of the Lazy J20, we also find Jesse Hoff's intention and motivation in creating this amplifier most intriguing... Working from the perspective of a

musician who simply wanted to use his cherished old Deluxe on stage, Hoff seems to have exploited an idea that was destined to significantly change his life quite by accident. With no business plan, and certainly no vision to build amplifiers, the quality of his work and the quality of his listening drew others like moths to a flame. At a time when so many builders are struggling to achieve and maintain an identity through their work, the idea that success and recognition can be attained solely through pure inspiration, timing and a little luck is uplifting, isn't it? All the more reason to take heart, squash all doubt, and boldly Quest forth in all that you do in 2013. Yes, you'll have to wait a while for a Lazy J amp, but based on our conversations with Jesse Hoff, you'll receive the same care and attention that he extends to all of his clients, building one amp at a time. **To**

REVIEW

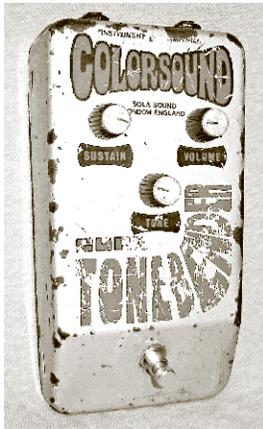
Lazy J Cruiser



As these words splash on to the page from wherever the mind may find them, it is early morning, January 1, 2013 – a day that traditionally represents hope and renewal as we greet the New Year, despite what some seem to have erroneously gleaned from the Mayan calendar. As usual, myth was conveniently substituted for fact by the lazy and ill-informed who believed the Mayan calendar 'ended' on December 21, 2012 and hence the world was doomed to end, perhaps by a catastrophic polar shift. The truth is that the Maya invented a *circular* calendar called the Long Count. On December 12, 2012 the largest grand cycle in the Mayan calendar ended – 1,872,000 days or 5,125.37 years, at which time they believed the cycle would overturn and a *new* cycle would begin. Big difference. But not as sexy as the end of days, eh? We are being spoon fed a load of shit by the media, people, on every level, and in respect to nearly all aspects of life. It matters not what side of the political or cultural fence you're on, whether you believe yours is the more righteous and intellectually reasoned cause, or if you have no cause at all. May you find the wisdom and conviction to think for yourself in 2013. Power to the people. Power to the people who bother to think.

We mention the case of the Mayan calendar gone wrong because we must confess that we are beginning to harbor grave doubts about the apparent obsession some guitarists cling

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to when it comes to overdrive pedals. Which one, you ask? Who knows? And we're no longer sure that we should care. You see, the mythical overdrive or boost pedal that bests all others is just that – a myth. The 'best' overdrive or boost pedal regularly appears as the one most often being hoisted on Yer Favorite Guitar Forum within the past month. Next month it will be something else, which means that the life cycle of the next 'best' booteek boost or

overdrive is, oh, about as long as a menstrual cycle. *If this one is now the best, what happened to the last best one? Was it not the best? But I really dig my Labia Maximus Luv Grenade... Do I need to sell it now?* Frankly, this kind of myopic shit drives us crazy.



Come on boys and girls... let's face it – the search for the holy grail among overdrive and boost pedals has become about as relevant and real as fantasy football. If you enjoy the fantasy, play on,

but let's not kid ourselves... When you play that game the best a pedal can do is make you think you sound better for a little while – until you are sucked into buying the next one. By all means, keep searching for the good stuff, but let's drop the term 'best' from the discussion of gear. To quote our good friend Sonny Landreth, *"To pre-suppose perfection is to assume that there is an end to creativity, and I don't believe that exists."*

On the other hand, a good boost pedal is essential to the modern guitarist's tool box. Self-conscious wanking and one-up-manship aside, getting the sound of a blown up amp at less than blown up volume levels is desirable and useful, and when you find a pedal that doesn't sound like it's there, that's something worth keeping. Yet defining the sound of a great boost



or overdrive pedal can't be done in a vacuum... What may sound great with our guitars and amps isn't necessarily going to sound the same with yours, and why should it? The best any of us can do is to carefully shape the tone we want with our own gear and then hope

to find an overdrive or boost pedal that simply makes it all sound bigger by degrees, without undesirably taking a dump on your signature sound.

So, how might Jesse Hoff's Cruiser be different, or even 'better' than the brand you're smoking now? First we should tell you that the thing sounds friendly and familiar without even understanding how it works. In fact, it's near impossible to screw up your tone no matter how you set it, and we tried. Mind you, the early '60s Gibson patent number pickups loaded in our goldtop Les Paul are ruthlessly revealing with amps and effects. The harmonic overtones and clarity are so vivid and rich that we can immediately detect the slightest bit of mud and grit creeping in to blur their brilliance. Same thing with our Nocaster loaded with Ron Ellis pickups, or our Junior with a '50s P90. Oh, are we bragging? Well, yes, we are. The Cruiser just seems to take whatever you put into it and make it bigger, by a little or a lot. Using the Gain, Saturation and Drive controls with their different gain stages can be compared to opening and squeezing doors. Big, wide and very toneful doors...

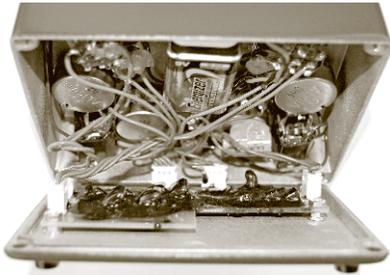


We ran the Cruiser mainly through our '65 Tremolux 2x10 because a rich and comparatively clean (but not pristine) signal just seems to work best with overdrive and boost effects. Yes,

it sounds equally fine with the '58 Tremolux, '66 Deluxe, and the sound of the Germino 55LV through our pinstripe 4x12 cab left us yearning for an outdoor festival gig badly. With the clipping toggle switch in the Up position, we could easily range from a moderately broken up tone to full out classic ZZ Top or Hendrix burn. The hard part is describing just how good those sounds really are. To be honest, we can't. There are no words. Mixing varying level settings for Drive and Saturation produces a mesmerizing array of subtle changes in sustain, intensity, attack and decay that truly offers the voice and sound of many amps in one. Amazing, really. With the toggle switch set in the middle position for no clipping, our rig took on the classic sound of a big Fender amp cranked, which is of course exactly what it is. The overdrive effect is completely authentic and real at all settings, and most pleasing and surprising is the way the treble strings remain so clear and singing even at higher gain, drive and saturation levels. Lows and midrange tones are huge, imposing and rich with pure fidelity, but how Hoff has managed to keep the treble tones so clear and musical escapes us. Certainly the Tremolux has something to do with it, and the pickups in our goldtop

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as well. Still, we heard the same with the Nocaster and Junior. The difference is that rather than hearing a lot of different pedal tones, playing through the Cruiser creates the experience of playing your guitar through different amplifiers that all sound really, *really* good, and different enough to make a difference worth pursuing.



Our least favorite setting is the down position on the toggle clipping switch that combines the sound of germanium and silicone transistors. We would describe the

narrow, sharper, compressed focus at this setting as a 'modern' overdriven sound common to certain modern amps with boost switches and modeling modes, perhaps. It's a cool effect for some things, but not a sound we would use often.

Overall, the Deuce Cruiser won us over for the ultimate in smooth, musical and varied levels of distortion that cover all the places you could possibly wish to go, and you'll have the interaction between the Gain, Volume, Drive and Saturation controls fully digested in minutes. Hoff's pedal transformed our '65 Tremolux into an interesting mix of American and British voices with simple and intuitive adjustments that had us 'lost' in the moment for a solid hour. Imagine the punch and imposing presence of a 100 watt stack coming out of a 35 watt amp on '6' with two ten inch speakers. At the very least, it will leave you feeling mighty cocky. Most important, the Cruiser inspired catchy, hook-laden original music that may well have remained undiscovered without it. Songwriters take note, and *all y'all* Quest forth...**TQ**

Our sincere thanks to TQR subscriber Hugh McCloy for suggesting that his Lazy J amp be shipped to us for review.

www.lazyjprojects.com

Wechter Guitars

Not long ago we received a call from a reader who was renewing his subscription. When he learned that he was speaking to the publisher, he asked how we decide what to cover in these pages, observing that we "probably didn't do much market research." Well, we know a passive-aggressive snipe when we hear one, and having spoken to thousands of subscribers over the years, we suspect this reader wanted a little more ink

devoted to the kind of stuff you might read about in an enthusiast's magazine that celebrates the fabulous lifestyle that can only be achieved through effete snobbery and the belief that cost is always an indicator of quality.



This is a view that doesn't always reflect reality in 2013. Sure, French wines were once the standard by which all others were judged, but

global markets have given us astonishingly good bargains from Chile, Australia and Spain. Beer? Not so much. While \$2 Pabst in the can is popular with the unemployed college grads here at the Euclid Avenue Yacht Club, it still sucks. By today's standards the classic cars built in Detroit that once dominated the automobile industry were stylish, trouble-prone and purpose-built for planned obsolescence, while unlikely names like Kia and Hyundai offer value and durability today that were unimaginable even 20 years ago. Like it or not, globalization can produce better products at a lower cost, and this fact certainly applies to guitar manufacturing.



Several months ago we were actually doing some market research online (!) when we came across a new line of budget Gretsch acoustic models – the Roots Series Boxcar, Bobtail and Honeydipper resonators that range in price from \$359.00-\$499.00. We were intrigued because we figured that while a lot of us would like to own a really good reso guitar, we don't want to spend a lot

on something that is, for most of us, a couch indulgence. We made a few inquiries about getting some guitars sent here for review that went nowhere – typical for Gretsch unfortunately, and wound up talking to Bob Willcutt at Willcutt Guitars one day who asked, "Have you ever played a Wechter?" No, we hadn't even heard of a 'Wechter' to be honest, but that was about to change. We contacted the Wechter company based in Ft. Wayne, Indiana through their web site, and it wasn't long before we were talking to the founder, Abraham Wechter. We arranged to receive two guitars for review – a dreadnought Select Mahogany 18, and a Scheerhorn Mahogany resonator priced at \$599.00 and \$749.00 respectively. Wechter guitars are made in China, where Abe Wechter lives and works most

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