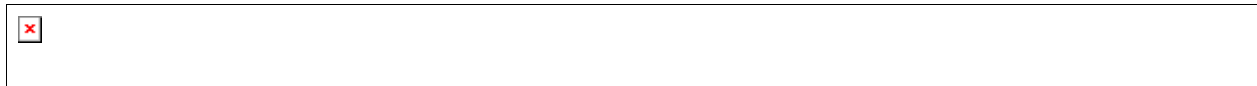


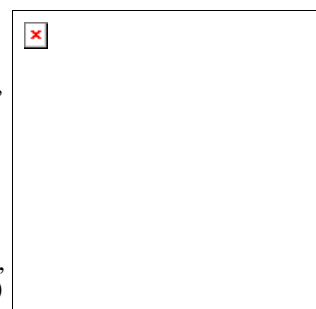


## TOPHAT INTERVIEW



DOUG: BRIAN, TopHat has been a very successful company building high quality toneful products for a long time now. Before we dive into how it all started, tell us about yourself.

BRIAN: Well, I'll be 42 years old in January, and I've lived here in Orange County, Ca. all my life. I started musically with piano lessons, in second grade. I then was forced to pay my dues (to my parents) in 4th grade, by playing my sister's hand-me-down clarinet, in order to play drums the next year -- which I did. I then took lessons and played drums in band and orchestra in junior high. They even had an after school advanced jazz band that played events at other schools. As I didn't want to be a high school band geek, I switched to guitar in 10th grade. So, I sold my Sonor drum set for a set of DiMarzio pickups for my Memphis Les Paul copy. Thus was my entry into rock and roll and the beginning of my guitar tone quest. I soon had a '71 Fender Mustang and, by the late 70's, I was going thru Flying Vs, BC Rich Bitches, Charvels, etc. My first real amp was a 100 watt Hiwatt 1x12 Bulldog that I added a Boss OD-1 foot pedal into internally, for onboard overdrive. I hated to have foot pedals and extra cords out front. I soon added a Marshall 4x12 and later mostly played Marshall amps that I modded in similar fashion. After building many parts guitars, I later finally came around to reissue Strats, Teles, Les Pauls, etc. And, after some rackmount stuff and early Bogners, I came around to Tweed Deluxes, Voxes, etc.



DOUG: I turned 42 in June, glad I'm not alone! What kind of mods were you doing, and what kind of music were you into back then?

BRIAN: The mod was mainly installing the Boss OD-1 into the front end of the amp. Nothing really innovative and not even tube. I was simply looking to push the amp further into overdrive at reasonable levels, without changing the overall tone too much. The OD-1 leaned out the bottom end a bit, but that was OK, as I was mostly playing humbuckers at the time. As for the music, it was the late 70's/early 80's and I was born of classic rock. Jimmy Page (who shares my birthday) was clearly my main influence early on. And, of course, to him I would add Ron Wood (in the Faces/pre Stones), the Young Bros. of AC/DC, Joe Perry and Billy Gibbons. A bit later Randy Rhodes, as opposed to Van Halen, was also an influence. I was playing in a backyard party band at the time, having much fun with my friends. It was a bit later that I came around to spending some time with the Beatles and getting deeper into old R & B, which includes the remaining chords (II, III, VI and VII's) not used in simple rock and roll.

DOUG: Why did you decide to start a guitar amplifier company?

BRIAN: I had been self employed from the late 80's and started a check cashing store, which I finally sold out and started an office furniture brokering business with a couple friends. It was at our shop that I started experimenting with building amps. I had 3 years of electronics in high school and 1 year in college. That was clearly enough to deal with old tube amp designs. I had also built Dynaco Dynakits (Hi-fi integrated amplifier) with my brother, when I was in Junior High. When I started with my first guitar tube amps, I started with Tweed Deluxes and AC30 designs. It was a bit tougher to get good information on the Vox stuff compared to the abundance of info on Fenders. That was the start of TopHat, in roughly 1993/4. When I started, there was mainly Kendrick and Matchless and a new gaggle of us starting into the business. Everything, including Fender, started going Tweed crazy. So, I chose to go more in the direction of Vox/Marshall -- which I was more familiar with anyway.

DOUG: Were there any particular artist's tones that made you go into a direction that lead to the first designs, or was it more a matter of what you sought out as a player?

BRIAN: I would say the two are almost inseparable. I believe we set into motion many things in our first months and years, as guitar players. Often, with many bad habits included. I strongly believe most of our tone, as guitar players, is in the hands. And, we develop the way we pick/attack the strings in the formative days. For me, if the guitar/amp arrangement did not provide the proper response, I would do everything I could (with my hands/pick) to force the response that I was looking for -- to achieve what I heard on records. I've heard, for example, guys in the old days

learning to replicate the slapback echo used by Les Paul, with their hands -- not necessarily knowing he was using an effect, but simply trying to replicate what they're hearing. People even learned to do it vocally, to replicate the Sun Records vocals they heard. To this day, it amazes me how different two people playing the same guitar and amp can produce such a wide variation of output response. I've heard people sound like the amp literally has half the power output, without touching the guitar or amp settings. As most of the amps I was playing didn't get the gain my ears wanted to hear, I would really whack the strings to get it over the top. I feel, by testing amps this way, this allows me to hear what an amp does under duress and exposes any bad distortion tendencies, when pushed hard. It's the transition from clean to dirty that is critical to me. If you only tested with a softer attack, it may have bad things happen, when really spanked. This clean/dirty transition is constantly happening in amps that break up fairly easy. Even at medium settings, it will go back and forth on the decay of slam of the strings. Amps that are on the true clean side and those on the higher gain side will tend to stay clean or dirty all the time. This is why I feel that medium gain, vintage circuits payoff the most, by hand wiring point to point. When it's complexly breaking up, as opposed to a perfect square wave, the detail and quality of the amp really comes through.

DOUG: What were the first TopHat amplifiers?

BRIAN: I started, as many did, selling custom order amps and selling parts to keep things moving. They were mostly Tweed Bassman/early Marshall designs, as well as Vox Top Boost stuff. I did have, for a very short while, a 4-gain stage modded Marshall design -- but, I only made a few of those. They don't make a lot of sense, in a hand built format. I soon realized that super clean or super dirty amps aren't benefited as much by point to point wiring (IMHO). I did make a 4-6V6 Class A JCM 800 type design that my friend still has. We just released a new version of that -- our latest release. More on that later.

DOUG: What were the big differences in these early amplifiers, and did you have a favorite TopHat model?

BRIAN: There were many differences from today. Over time, you find what different caps, resistors, trannies do and finally refine it to a T. The early amps were very warm and creamy, but had less ability to do a really good cleaner tone. We have tried to continually grow -- always reevaluating and keeping an open mind to how I can make them better. I learned fairly early on that an amp that cost \$1000 and up needs to satisfy more than a small niche in a player's arsenal. If a guy came to the determination that an amp only works for certain guitars, musical styles, etc., then pretty soon he would sell it. I want to keep my amp owners happy for life and able to use our amps for most any kind of need. It doesn't serve me well to compete with my amps being sold on the secondary market. Also, I feel a need to justify raising the prices over time, by improving them -- rather than more money for the same amp. My favorite model is the Vox based King Royale. Of course, the Emplexador is easier for me to play, being closer to what I used for most of my playing years. But, the King is a perfect happy medium and is close enough to a Marshall type thing for me to do everything I like to do. Especially a humbucker guitar - thru the King is plenty gainy enough. There is a weaning off of high gain that is beneficial to help make a guitar player better. It is a more honest and natural response to a guitar and has great fullness for single coil guitars, which offer a better range of clean to dirty, at the guitars volume knob.

DOUG: Were you building them yourself?

BRIAN: Oh, yes. All the early stuff was done by me alone. It was after I standardized our product line that I got my first employee, BRIAN Mena of Menatone pedal fame. He later left to start his company. I later got some people from Matchless, as they were about to go out of business. I also have an aircraft wiring guy. They clearly do a nicer job of wiring my amps than I ever did. I know them inside out, but there is an art to wiring that gets better with years of experience.

DOUG: I hear you. It was one of my biggest fears when I started hiring assemblers - can they do an equal job, or better? It certainly frees us up, and gets more product out there. Part of me doesn't miss standing 20 hrs a day soldering, part of me does. I love building the prototypes. Do you miss building all the amps yourself, and are you involved in the QC process of each amplifier?

BRIAN: I don't really miss those days. I love designing, experimenting, etc., but the job of sitting for hours day after day in front of the same type chassis is not for me. I would go crazy. It takes a special person with more patience than I have to do this and I thank God I have the finest people (that I care so much about) that can do that. I don't mind delegating it to those better suited. I did the QC for a long time, but once the designs settled into a consistent format, it was possible to have others do that. I do constantly play what's coming off the line and compare to great old vintage amps for reference. I also deal with any oddities that occur and the deeper problems that arise. Different batches of tubes and speakers always need to be crosschecked with different ears. It's easy to get jaded and think everything is going right. If I ever hear anything else that really impresses me, I go back to what I'm doing and confirm that I have the best product that I can, leaving no stone unturned.

DOUG: How many TopHat models are there in your current product line, and what are their features?

BRIAN: We have 8 different models, not counting different wattage and speaker configurations. We have our Portly

Cadet and Prince Royale in our single ended 5-watt Studio Series. The Portly has a 6V6 and the Prince uses an EL84. We have our Club Series, made up of the Royale, Deluxe and Super Deluxe. The Royale has 2-EL84's, the Deluxe has 2-6V6s and the Super has 2-6L6's. They're all cathode biased Class A amps. In our Flagship Series, we have the King Royale, Emplexador and the Ambassador. The Royale is an AC30 design with 4-EL84's. The Emplexador is our Marshall based amp (50, 100 and NEW 40 watt Class A versions) with a Vintage/Modern switch (2 and 3-gain stages). The Ambassador is our Blackface reverb design, available in 35-watt Class A, 50 and 100-watt Class AB versions. The Emplexador can run most any large power tube and we put in EL34's stock. The Ambassador uses 6V6's in Class A and 6L6's on the Class AB models, which can also run EL34's. Of course, we have an assortment of extension speaker cabs, too. Lastly, we have one booster pedal, the Wonderboy, which has a clean boost and a discrete overdrive. Sort of two pedals in one.

DOUG: I'm sure our readers will have this question in their minds right away - what exactly does the "vintage/modern" switch do, and how is it used?

BRIAN: That switch on our Emplexador model simply adds an extra gain stage to the baseline Plexi preamp. It turns the Plexi preamp into the late JMP/JCM 800 3-gain stage arrangement. It also cools down the master, to help keep it better balanced -- not too gritty grindy. It really helps the amp have a wide range of gain and really works well at lower volumes. Combined with our bright boost and treble/fat switches, it allows a player to really dial in the right response to his guitar.

DOUG: Being a builder myself, I know what a constant battle it is to maintain a high quality product. As we both know, the tube situation has been bad for a longtime. Its one piece from one company, two from another, etc.... What are you using for tubes now?

BRIAN: We do use a mix of tubes. For 12AX7's, I use the EH's in the first position and on the recovery stages in the Ambassadors. We use EI brand (Yugo) in the other positions. They are true tall plates that sound big, like NOS stuff. But, they are simply too microphonic for the front end. We tend to use EH brand 12AT7's and 12AY7's. We also tend to use the EH's on 6L6's, 6V6's and EL34's. I'm about to try the new Groove Tube "Mullard" 12AX7's that I'm interested in for the 1st position in most of my amps. I have heard very good things about them, but haven't got them in just yet. I've never used them in the past, for various reasons, but I hold out hope for these.

DOUG: I was using the EH 6V6 in my Custom 30 watt until the new JJ 6V6 came into the picture. Its an amazing tube, and it handles a load of current without coughing. Have you tried this one yet?

BRIAN: No, not yet. I will give them a try though, with an open mind. In general, I like the quality of JJ's tubes. But, they don't mix as well with my amps vibe, IMHO. It is very subjective and some people do like them in my amps. You recently pointed out some issues with the EH's that I want to check out to make sure the current production are all coming out right.

DOUG: Just like tubes, speakers can be a tedious job trying lots of different things. What have been your findings over the years, and your current speaker preferences?

BRIAN: This is an issue in flux. I literally just ran out of English made Celestions and they seem to all be China made now. As for now, I continue to use them -- mostly G12H's and some V30's and Greenbacks. So far, I don't seem to notice a big issue. However, I am concerned about consistency and I'm just beginning to do detailed comparisons. There are still no 10" speakers that I'm happy with and still don't use them in anything stock. I've tried some of the new Eminence -- the Red Coat Series and I'm impressed. They are far better than any of their previous stuff, to me. So, I may start using some of them in the future, but I can't say for sure, just yet.

DOUG: I started noticing the cone heights on V30's being different from speaker to speaker, and once I started AB tests, I found very few to sound the same. The new Eminence line is killer, they don't sound like Celestions, but IMO, much better. Are you going to try any of their 12" speakers?

BRIAN: I have tried only the Red Fang so far and was impressed. Compared to all the earlier lines of Eminence, it really seemed far better. I need to try the ceramic ones and I'll let you know. There is clearly now an incentive to move in that direction -- American made vs. China made. However, my understanding about the factory/company in China that owns and now produces the Celestions is they have been making KEF hi-fi speakers (as well as other hi-end stuff) for some time. If so, it would seem that the comparatively lo-fi Celestion guitar speaker shouldn't be that tough to assemble. I'd also heard that China had been making the components for English made speakers for some years now, It is the assembly that recently moved to China. China is really climbing the ladder of quality very quickly, though my American heart hates to say it.

DOUG: Can you tell our readers about any new TopHat products in the works?

BRIAN: We just came out with a new version (as stated above) of our Emplexador -- it has 4-6V6's running in Class

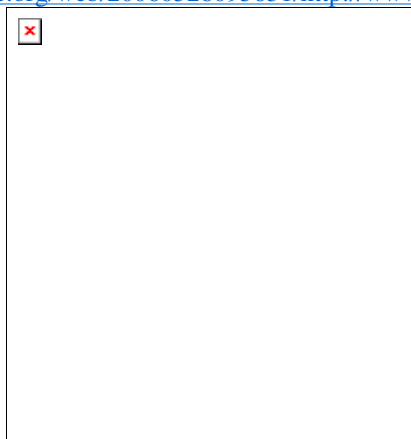
A. We've only just shipped the first one and it seems to be generating a lot of interest. The other new thing is that our Club Royale was recently changed back to being tube rectified, after many years of being done with solid-state (loaded for GZ34 and 5Y3 voltages and sag, never naked SS). We are currently finishing up a true 2-channel version of our Emplexador that will have separate inputs for a Blonde Bassman channel and a separate Marshall channel. It can be channel switched with a simple passive or buffered A/B box. We will probably have our own A/B box with the clean boost built into it.

DOUG: I'm sure our readers again are going to want more info here. Can you go into more detail on the Emplexador, and Club Royale, features, tones etc.?

BRIAN: Doug, lets leave this for future articles.

DOUG: Sounds good! Thanks Brian for taking time to answer these questions. We'll be looking forward to hearing more from you, and TopHat Amplifiers.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060528095631/http://www.tophatamps.com/>



---

© 2004 - 2005 Guitar Amplifier Magazine. All national and international rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without the written permission of Guitar Amplifier Magazine is prohibited.

---