

What follows is a customer review submitted by Bob Cisternas

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A little background on me...I'm basically no one when it comes to the guitar. I'm 41, been hacking away off & on, mostly on, since I was 13. Never had a formal "lesson" or went to music school...but I've been "schooled" a lot over the years!

Of course, in the 80's I was being "retro" playing Black Sabbath etc...but my tone was anything but classic. I played through crappy transistor amps, (not that ALL transistor amps ARE crappy, but these one's I'm talking about are REAL crap!) I had an Ibanez Artist strung with whatever, DiMarzio Super Distortions, and an DoD overdrive. (I was STYLIN!) That was it...that's as far as I took tone for a LONG time.

It had some benefits, as I didn't have a lot of effects to fall back on, so I did develop some technique, most of it trying to get some tone through the mess that I was making my signal into. Alas that all changed with the advent of the floor mounted digital multi effects units. I admit, over the years, as my budget increased, I tried almost all of them. Still through crappy amps. Now my crap sound had LAYERS to it. Thin, metallic buzzing with What ever layers of processing I felt like throwing on there! (I'm sure you get the picture!) Then more expensive transistor or hybrid name brand amps. Still crap. But getting better...

Fast forward to today. I'm old now. (My excuse for getting into the vintage & analog lands.) And, as it's so fashionable among guitar players to say..."I'm all about the tone!" Now, before you go & get all excited...you just don't "get" the "tone." It doesn't strike you like a bolt of lightening...rather, it grows on you, like a mold. You become SENSATIVE to it. For me, that was quite a process, and it took a while.

Don't get me wrong, I KNEW I didn't sound like any of the classic tracks I WANTED to emulate ...but I just couldn't get there. I was takin' BIG HUGE swings at the sound, not the subtle gentle massages I've come to use now.

That's the TRUE essence of "THE Tone." It's YOUR tone, shaped by the sounds you hear and enjoy, and the numerous subtleties YOU hear in the sound that no one else might. Until you develop an ear for that...you'll spend a lot of time chasin' your tail to get there!

My rig now?

Guitars:

Martin 0028

Ovation 1778T-RF

2 Fender Masterbuilt Eric Clapton Signature Strats (Mid-Boost, NO TBX, Kinman AvN Blues Pickups.)

1960 Les Paul Standard (I play the strats almost exclusively.)

Pedals: (In order)

Analog Man A/B with channel switching & master in ->
Petersen Strobo Stomp Tuner ->
Analog Man Sun Face Fuzz ->
Keeley Mello Wah (Vox) ->
Z.vex Johnny Octave ->
Siegmond Double Drive
Analog Man Maxxon OD-9 Silver KWS
Analog Man Bi-Chorus
Analog Man Maxxon AD-9 Delay
Voodoo PedalPower Power Supply
Pedal Train pedal case

Cables:

George L's vintage brass

Amps:

Siegmond Midnite Blues Breaker 35W
Siegmond Midnite Special
Soldano SLO 100W
Fender Blues Deluxe (highly modified by Torres Engineering)

Yeah, I know, it's not exactly cheap...but there's another benefit of SUBTLE. This is a rig I grew into over MANY years. Sort of a combination of need & desire, and it's still evolving. Eventually I'm going to get rid of the SLO & get a high power Midnight Blues Breaker in 65W with a 4x12 to replace it. (I really don't need that kind of gain anymore.)

I'll go into detail on the Double Drive & the Midnight Blues Breaker separately, but for now a few quick words that will hopefully save you some time & frustration!

Fingers. It ALL starts at the fingers. No way round it. No way to cover it up. Work on your chops. Great players always have their signature tone with them cause its in their fingers no matter WHAT gear they play through! The better your tone & your signal, the better you will be able to hear the effect your fingers have.

Strings & Guitars. Personal choice, and there are SO many good ones out there. Here's the thing, you don't NEED to spend a ton of money to get a real nice guitar...but get a real nice one. Especially if you are a beginner, the proper reach & fit can make it so much easier & bring you quicker results. Here's a good time to plug "support your local music shop." Don't mail order a guitar without ever having played it, unless you know exactly what you're buying & that it's what you want. Scale length, radius, fret size, weight...all these little variables add up towards making an axe feel like a part of your body, or having it be something you have to wrestle every note out of. Even if you don't UNDERSTAND all of the subtleties, trying different guitars is a great way to learn them. Local music shops offer the added benefit of having access to used guitars that you can actually play, and believe me, there are a LOT of used guitars out

there that have been well cared for & sound better than the same model brand new!

Same goes with strings...LOTS of different ones out there, different gauges, different feels & different treatments. Experiment...you'll never know what you come across that is just gonna give you that "feeling." And when you get that "feeling" you get that much closer to that "tone." The rule of thumb is heavier strings equal fatter tone, but are harder to play. Well, if your playing a gage you can't manage, guess what, it's going to sound like you can't! And I can get a pretty deep thick tone with 10's, so play what's comfortable. As your hands develop strength & dexterity then experiment with heavier strings if you like.

Cables. Don't use crap cables. I like the George L's. Buy the Cable in bulk, buy as many ends as you need. It makes building & maintaining your pedals SO much easier than preformed cables, and keeps your signal consistent. (You can buy them pre-made as well, and some dealers will make them for you any length you want.) The cables are award winning for tone, which is a huge plus, but the immediate payoff here is convenience & value. Can I hear the difference between a high end cable & a store brand bargain? Absolutely. No, I can't hear the difference really between a Monster Studio Pro & a George L, but I know the price is about 75% cheaper!

If anyone has any questions I can help you with with anything listed above, feel free to email me...but for now that's it for the generalities.

Well, I wanted a new amp...and I had settled on a rather long list of requirements, some of which I found out to be mutually exclusive...

- all tube
- point-to-point wiring
- no more than 2 channels
- tube reverb
- adjustable drive section
- master volume

What I needed was something versatile, could deliver pure straight in vintage rock/blues tones, but would also have enough headroom for acoustic & for some subtle effects not to get lost in. I needed drive at volumes less than ear-splitting, but also wanted that low-watt pure tube tone.

So, I started my search. I checked out some of the "vintage reissues" from the big 2, as well as called & emailed a few boutique amp builders. Now, I know I'm a nobody, but I'm also a nobody that's looking to spend \$3k+ on a new amp, but apparently that doesn't seem to matter to many. Some never returned phone calls or emails, others seem more interested in pushing you into models that they already have built but may not meet your specific needs.

Enter Chris Siegmund. I had gotten Chris' information from an article in Tone Works & sent him an email...to which I got a prompt reply. I never pretended to be something I wasn't...which was made all the more amazing by the amount of time Chris spent with me making sure I got exactly what I

wanted. I wasn't interested at the time in "technicalities" and instead tried to develop a dialog where I could describe to him what it was I was looking for sound wise. There were sound bytes on his website, along with a lot of techno-babble...but at the time I had NO IDEA how any of that effected tone...and to a large extent I still don't! But I know 1000 times more now, and it's all thanks to Chris. We have had several lengthy email exchanges since then, developing a dialog where the most under & mis-educated customer (me) can actually tell him in lay mans terms what's going on, what it sounds like, & how to get the sounds that I'm looking for.

Spending this kind of money off some emails & some mp3's does have a side of it that screams DANGER! And rightfully so. I was upfront about that, and Chris was quite understanding, and by the time we met on level at which we both could understand each other, well all my fears were abandoned.

After MUCH deliberation back & forth on tubes & power supplies & wattages, (all I might add with Chris having to educate me on the real information versus some of the hype & misinformation that's peddled to us everyday), this is the order that I placed...

MB small black head 30W medium power Reverb and 16ohm RS
Upgrade to KT66 Genelex (original)
Upgrade to GZ34 Mullard (original)
2x12 demo black MB cab, 2x12 Alnico Tone Tubby Custom
Padded black cover head
Padded black cover 2x12 cab
DoubleDrive

The amp is a single channel design, with a LOT of tuning capability. There's a tube reverb, and a serial effects loop. (He also offers the amp with a parallel loop & no reverb.) I just like reverb, its floor switchable, and didn't want to go to a pedal for it.

Single channel in this case may sound to some a bit limiting, and I was immediately thinking that way, but let me tell you...it's not limiting AT ALL. This is one of the most versatile amps I've ever played...made even moreso by the DoubleDrive.

There were numerous upgrades...some desired by me, most however suggested by Chris, with of course ALL my options laid out for me, with pricing, and with what the gain would be in each. Chris was also great at giving me options on demo cabs & speakers & things he had in stock that reduced the overall price as well, once again being upfront about everything.

The net result of all this is that one gets the impression, both immediately & completely, that Chris wants you to have what you want, if it's within his power to deliver it! At no point in time did I feel pressured or like I was being lead down a path or was being price gouged. Just the opposite really, I felt like I wasn't technically able to keep up with MY end of the decision making process, and Chris was MORE THAN ACCOMODATING in educating me to the level of making those decisions.

This is one of the first true dichotomies one sees in Chris...his products are COMPLETELY his children, he puts his heart & soul into every one of them. And yet, as the creator, he remains impartial enough to ensure that his will doesn't over power yours.

So, about some of the upgrades...

The Alnico Hemp Tone Tubby Speakers - I have heard NOTHING but good things about them, and a 12" Ceramic Hemp Tubby in my Blues Deluxe sealed that fate. These speakers rule. Chris has a WIDE variety of speakers available & the combinations are endless, so once again...what do you WANT? Don't know? That's cool...Chris will explain it to ya, then you can agonize over it!

I went with the head/cabinet configuration because a separate cabinet just gives better sound...and for the vain part of me I love the retro look! Trying to decide between 2x12 & 4x10 was a bit difficult. Originally I was thinking along the lines of a "Super Bassman" with 5881's into a 4x10, but this is one of the examples of Chris educating me and money coming into play. The 2x12 was cheaper. And, at 30-35w, one of my sons friends whos a recording engineer said that to mic a room the 4x10 was better, but to mic live through a PA where the mic picks up 1 speaker the 12's were better. He seemed to think I would barely notice the difference, so I went with the 2x12. (This wasn't to be my last deviation from the Super Bassman theme & rapidly approached the Bluesbreaker theme!)

Chris' cabinets have removable baffles, so anytime I have the funds he can whip me up a baffle loaded with any speaker combos that I want & I can pop it into the cabinet...takes a couple of minutes.)

Power Supply - Radio Spares Custom Enhanced JTM45 16ohm special A/AB switch. There's information on it on the web site, and I have emails of information provided me by Chris as to the birth of the power supply. Every source I encountered has said the same thing...this is the Holy Grail of power supplies...designed specifically for the KT66.

Which brings me to the tubes. Now, originally I wanted 5881's. And after many more emails Chris had described to me the virtues of the KT66, so I went & ordered vintage KT66's from him, along with 5881's. I'll give you more details a bit later on, but once again, remember versatility here, I STILL can't decide which I like better in this amp, the KT66's or the 5881's! You will become a mad tube scientist!

The GZ34 Mullard was, as Chris put it, "best rectifier, lasts forever." Also included with his amp is a special sold state rectifier. To be honest, I couldn't tell you what it sounds like, I never put it in!

Though Chris likes custom cabinetry, I saved money here going with a black vinyl covered cabinet he had in stock.

And as for the covers...GET THEM! They are SUPERB! Tough, heavily padded & secure.

Chris is a one man operation, and as such I expected there to be a lead time on the amp, but delivery happened exactly on schedule as promised. There was a problem finding a pair of original KT66's, so Chris shipped the amp with the 5881's in it. Damn him!

Packing was superb, heavy boxes, well padded & with the covers on the head & cabinet, so all made it through ok. There was a tear in the box with the cabinet in it, but upon inspection it was fine, looked liked something was leaned against it.

Though this whole process, Chris & I were emailing each other quite a bit, and developed a sort of friendship/rapport that one must experience to believe. Very old-worldly in certain aspects, pride, craftsmanship, customer service, but also very evolutionary with what he feels sound should develop as. His views on life are definitely reflected in his art...and it's in this manner that we communicate best...so suffice to say, my review of the amp is probably not going to sound like anything you ever heard before!

Chris,

Wow.

I mean like I had NO FRIGGIN IDEA it was going to be this good WOW. So far just guitar, cable, amp...haven't touched anything else yet.

I'm speechless. I have NEVER, and I mean NEVER heard an amp like this before.

I really don't know what else to say right now, so I'm gonna Play more!

Bob

So this was the actual email Chris got after I powered up & plugged in. Oh, another note here, if you are going to run ANY tube amp, especially something this high end, PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE run a power conditioner! I use the Furman PF-Pro, but there are others out there. Not just a cheapo spike strip mind you, but a real conditioner that supplies sine wave power with no sags. My Midnight Blues Breaker has NEVER been plugged into the wall, but I have done it with the Soldano back to back & you can hear the difference. I've played places with some pretty crappy power, and I look at it as a \$300.00 insurance policy!

Initially I felt somewhat inadequate to even be commenting on the amp for a couple of reasons. One being my somewhat narrow exposure to "Vintage" amps, my familiarity lies more towards the mass produced items. The second is my lack of what I refer to as "adequate vocabulary." I read amp reviews & hear things like "Post Attack Bloom" or "Full Bodied Sound with a hint of sag." It dawned on me that I might not be the ONLY person who has no freaking idea what they are saying, to as best I can I want you to know what I think in my own words.

The Midnite Blues ROCKS! And it Blueses, and it Rolls too. Here's the thing that stands out in my head as the most amazing...the effect of all the controls. In many of the amps I have, there seems to be a narrow range of "alteration" in the controls, or a non-linear effect whereby dialing in MORE of something doesn't provide me with added results. On certain amps dialing in too much gain seems to drown out the tonal or musical quality of the signal. A lot of the tone controls I have used do the same thing at their higher levels. What blows me away about the MBB is that the controls have an even, predictable WIDE range of effect, but they NEVER saturate or compromise the actual MUSIC. Some amps I have used actually sound like the gain or boost is the signal, and the actual NOTES are just thrown in for good measure. This experience for me is completely the opposite.

The sound can be shaped & molded over a HUGE range, but it's always a

molding of the sound coming from my fingers. This in & of itself isn't a good thing, because flaws in technique & laziness in picking & fingering are NOT tolerated by the MBB. I equate it to a well designed race bike, she will forgive your less than perfect execution of a particular skill & save your ass, but she will NOT tolerate one's imposition of ignorance or completely improper technique! I've probably discovered more about my playing in the first 6 or so hours on this amp than the last 6 years!

The drive section alone is amazing. (Here's where my illiteracy really becomes humorous!) The knob in the back I call my Rogaine knob. It effects the amount of hair or fuzz available to the Gain knob. I also discovered that the amount of gain seems to have a marked effect on the reverb. With the gain all the way down, the reverb is VERY slight, once gain comes up reverb has a much more pronounced effect. In light of this, the reverb footswitch is quite handy. The gain knob seems to work in the traditional manner, yet over such a wide range of effect, putting as much of that hair from the Rogaine knob as I want into the mix.

Ah, but the drive knob...that's my ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT knob. I almost want to call it a valve, cause to me it turns up the pressure coming from the speakers with remarkably fluid control. This combined with the Master Knob, which I call my Bad Neighbor knob, gets UNBELEIVEABLE tone at even the lowest volume levels. I don't call it the "good neighbor" knob because the tone just gets better & better the harder I drive those alnico Tubbies!

The speakers are incredible, always providing full tone, with the normal deeper more relaxed sound that you expect from 2x12's. At first, playing at lower volume levels, I expected the normal amount of distortion & loss of low to low-mid quality as the volume rose, but this was never the case! The master is a TRUE master, and tone just gets better as the volume goes up. Many of the new amps I have used give you all of their adjustment at relatively low settings across the board. When you actually open a control up later you find too many shortcomings at higher gain, drive, master, & eq settings.

Although I have found a couple of "sweetER spots" for different sounds so far, there are as yet to be found ANY less than sweet spots! Even the Mid-Boost in my Clapton Strat, which has been known in a few amps to do nothing really other than make the sound muddy & flat, shines through, it's sometimes "negative" effect on tone now gone. In fact, all the controls on my guitars seems to have had their responses upgraded as well!

The 5881's sound incredible in the MBB, as do the KT66's. I really don't think I've ever had the opportunity to experiment like that & feel comfortable judging the difference. To be quite frank, I've changed tubes in amps before & been REALLY hard pressed to notice a difference, but the responsiveness of the MBB to shaping tone gives you the ability to hear MUCH more subtleties in the sound than I have ever heard.

This intuitiveness in shaping the sound has had another wonderful side effect for me. There have been quite a few sounds on classic albums & live performances over the years that I thought were truly incredible. Those times where you know there was all the stars aligned & tonal history was made. Through the years, (especially through the ignorance & ego of youth!) I have tried all manner of electronic gimmickery to replicate these sounds, and always succeeded in achieving a thin, metallic artificial

sound. The range over which the MBB can be adjusted, and the subtlety & linearity make it easy & rather intuitive to get closer to some of those classic tones than I have ever been, and all this playing through not a single pedal (YET!!)

Just like in those favorite recordings we all have, one can see the color of the sound, shade it, independent of the effects mixed in...then use the effects to BLEND IN new color to the sound, not just through a bucket of gray over it!

With the 5881's the MBB right now, though not as "sparkly" or "bright" as a Fender, seems to have more of a combination of Marshall type tone, but retains that rough, edgy, somewhat unpolished & sharper gain of a Fender.

The thing I really like is that where a Fender starts to get too "coarse" at higher gain settings & the music starts to get overwhelmed by the distortion, the MBB just seems to add more & more gain, but creamier, never overwhelming the signal from the pickups, just pushing that signal harder
& harder.

The standard Bass/Mid/Treble adjustments are there, with a nice amount of overlap that although does take a bit of time to get used to is very flexible. The master knob also has a pull bright switch that I usually have ON, but I've also use the DoubleDrive to add a more Treble loaded gain stage to cut through the mix.

The amp is A/AB switchable, and with the 5881's in class A, the response is what I would call the "laziest." Perhaps the most "raw" of all the tones,

I hesitate to use the word coarse, but definitely the roughest sound. The controls all seem to act their most lazy at this point, as if you are merely suggesting changes in coloration to the amp. This is probably what I would call the most organic in sound.

With the same tubes switched to AB mode, the sound tightens up some. The changes dialed in the knobs have a more defined effect, almost as if the amp is giving up some of it's control over to you!

With the 5881's & the bright switch out, its definitely a honking Texas type sound, more so it seems in AB mode to me. There's a depth to the sound and a natural harmonic quality to the sound that I haven't heard in most Fenders. Push in the bright & back off the Rogaine some & you can dial in some seriously deep rich JTM45 type tones, though once again, rougher & more coarse than the KT66's.

With KT66's in place, the harmonics seem to deepen quite a bit, the sound blooms more. (I think I just used one of those fancy reviewer words!) Mids are emphasized a bit more, and the roughness of the 5881's becomes smoothed out some.

Though I wouldn't ever suggest this amp is a gain monster & you don't want to play metal through it, the KT66's drive well into the realm of classic hard rock & some older heavy metal. (Think Sabbath, AC/DC, Zep) Pull out the drive knob, burry the Master & then turn up the Gain as much as you dare, you go through max headroom to pure power tube output tone with a bit

of a Brit flavor to it.

As I said, this is a single channel amp, and although that may seem to have some disadvantages to it, I can assure you it hasn't hampered me in ANY

way as far as versatility in this rig. In fact, I consider it to be one of more versatile amps I have ever used, so long as you approach it with the proper knowledge. I use one of Chris' Micro Tube Double Drives in conjunction with the MBB, and that adds to the pallet quite a bit, and gives me in essence 2 more channels to use with warm tube tone, and that's not counting using the TS808 mod OD9 Tube Screamer.

Because of the clarity of the signal both up to & through the MBB, your effects will also take on a whole new level of subtley & adjustability. Pretty much to the pedal I found I had to back all of them off from where I had them set for other amps. You will definitely hear all the strengths & weaknesses in your effect like never before.