

Finding and restoring old amps and cabinets is a slow process that demands patience. From the time we first began trolling eBay, ultimately scoring a tweed *Vibrolux* and *Tremolux*, to final delivery of the aged cabinets and assembly of the amps, six months had easily passed.



We first found and bid on a '58 *Vibrolux* in September '06. Sold by an eBay seller in Texas, it had been recovered in red-dish-brown cloth similar to the stuff used to cover hymnals or a bad '60s pleather recliner for the double-wide. Otherwise, it was pretty straight, with the original blown *Jensen P10R* intact, and the original transformers, caps and resistors. The inside of the cabinet had been painted black, but the cabinet, grill cloth, baffle and control panel were otherwise intact, and the wooden tremolo footswitch was included. We bought the *Vibrolux* for \$1,590.00 with 4 bids placed.

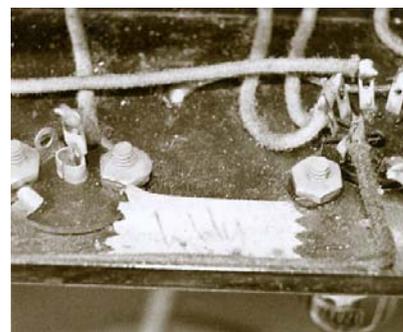


Inspired by Larry Cragg's detailed description of Neil Young's tweed *Tremolux*, a 1958 *Tremolux* surfaced on eBay in November 2006, and we scored it for just \$1,082.00 from a seller in San Francisco. We suppose this amp was so cheap because the output transformer had been replaced, and the cabinet had been completely stripped and stained mahogany brown. The original speaker mounting screws in the baffleboard were about to fall out. However, the original *Tremolux* circuit was well-preserved, and a small strip of tape remained in the chassis signed in a delicate hand by "Lilly" – one of the many women in Fullerton employed to assemble amplifiers like the *Tremolux* in 1958. God bless her. The *Tremolux* also arrived with the original wooden footswitch.

Restoration



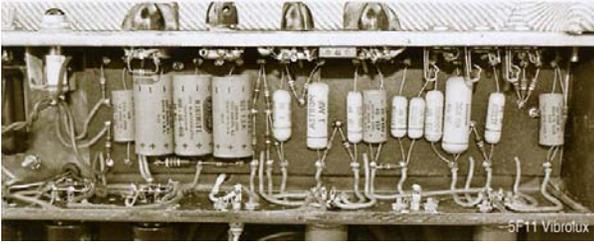
The *Vibrolux* kicked some serious tail right out of the box. We send the original *Jensen P10R* to John Harrison at *A Brown Soun* (www.abrown.com) for a recone, mounting a 1965 *Jensen C10Q* sent by Larry Pogreba in its place – a very stout choice and original equipment in early blackface *Vibrolux Reverb* amps. Like the *Tremolux*, the tremolo circuit in the *Vibrolux* required some TLC, with four caps needing replacement to restore the swampy oscillator circuit to full wobble-weave. We also replaced all the newish tubes with NOS RCAs, Philips and GEs. Once we had the amp mounted in the restored and aged cabinet, we were throwing down hard with our *Nocaster* nightly, wallowing in the big sound coming from such an innocent-looking little biter, when the original output trans-



former gave it up in a final, glorious gasp. A quick call to **Mercury Magnetics** produced a **ToneClone** replacement within a week and we were soon back in business, sounding better than ever.

The 10 watt, 3-input '58 5F11 *Vibrolux* is housed in the same cabinet *Fender* used for narrow panel tweed *Deluxe* – a fat little featherweight with greasy tremolo and a smooth bark tailor made for a *Telecaster*. And 10 watts may be the perfect power notch for low-volume home recording and jamming – crystal clear, bright and drenched in gorgeous *Fendery* overtones at low volume (3-5), and absolutely on fire from 7-10. In all respects, the 5F11 *Vibrolux* is a big amp in a small package worth pursuing for its outstanding tone and personality at truly usable volume levels.





We were amazed by how Gregg had managed to remove every trace of black paint that had been sprayed inside the cabinet, and his aging job, complete with three coats of amber stain and lacquer, faint water stains along the bottom, worn seams and corners, aged L&L leather handles and scorch marks from the power tubes on the inside of the back panel were flawlessly conceived

and applied. Hopkins even recreated the original tube chart with a 1958 date code after requesting that we send him the chassis number and power transformer EIA code for production verification. When we brought the restored *Vibrolux* to Jeff Bakos' shop (www.bakosampworks.com), he looked it up and down as it sat on the floor of his workshop, peered into the back and said, "That is totally sick."

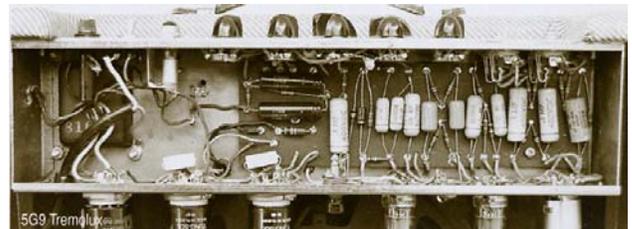


The '58 *Tremolux* provided a further study in what can be involved buying 40 year-old amps. Upon arrival, the amp was really smokin,' even with the *Jensen* hangin' off the baffle board. The tremolo was DOA, however, so while the stripped cabinet was getting the spa treatment in St. Louis, Jeff replaced two caps in the trem circuit, we replaced the already replaced output transformer with another from *Mercury Magnetics*, and stored the chassis away until we received the finished, aged *Tremolux* cabinet from Gregg in late March '07.

The 5E9A ('55-'56) and 5G9 ('57-'60) *Tremolux* are housed in the same taller, wider cabinet Fender used for the 1x15 narrow panel tweed *Pro*, and the later 5G9 circuit is quite different from both the 5E3 *Deluxe* and the '55 5E9A *Tremolux*, being fixed rather than cathode biased, employing

a long-tailed phase inverter common to the bigger narrow panel tweed amps, and the addition of an extra filter cap and choke enabled the power to be increased from 15W to 18W in 1957.

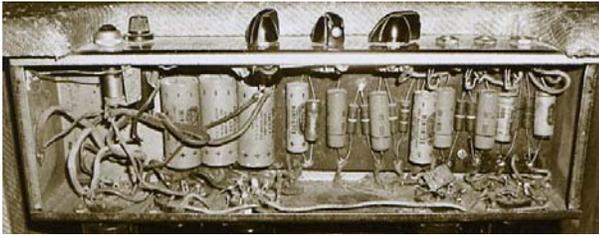
Compared to the narrow panel tweed *Deluxe* and the 5E9 *Tremolux*, the 5G9 *Tremolux* develops more volume and headroom, and should you chose to replace the 12AY7 preamp tube with a 12AX7, gain is further increased (it's already righteous with the 12AY), while the bigger 10" x 22" x 10" cabinet produces a much rounder, warmer tone with superior ambience and presence. In the month or so since we've had the *Tremolux* put together in the restored cabinet, a new *Tung Sol* 6V6 blew (after we had opted not to use a couple of spare '50s RCAs for safety – they are in the amp now and killin' us with bogs of good thang), and we just took the amp back to Jeff when it began spitting some nasty distortion provoked by low frequencies from the guitar. Turned out to be a few bad solder joints.



Like the *Vibrolux*, Gregg had stopped short of creating a "3-legged dog with an eye patch," taking the aging to a moderate level with frayed edges and seams on the amber tweed, a single beer can ring on the top with a foam overflow stain running down the grill cloth, a slight orange stain on one side from pine knot bleed, and assorted scuffs and light abrasions. He also repaired the baffle-board, filling in the old holes for the speaker mounting screws.

We hate doing this to you (again), but truth be told, we have to give the nod to the *Tremolux* as the most toneful and inspiring amp in its power class (18 watts) that we have ever heard or owned. It's ascension to *Numero Uno* status was a bit of a surprise, but then again, we considered the initial source of our inspiration for finding one – Neil Young, via his tech, Larry Cragg, and in hindsight we

should have expected as much. With all the attention paid to the tweed *Deluxe* as the big time bonerizer of the tweed family, the *Tremolux* seems to have been overlooked for the usual reasons.... In the nose-to-butt-crack daisy-chain march to mediocrity, the masses never seem to acquire a view beyond the first lazy dumb-ass directly in front of them. In the immortal words of the great hoosier educator and smack-down artist Earl Dosey, they are "stepping' over dimes to pick up nickels." Let's hope the lemmings continue to keep their heads down.



So here's the move.... Sad as we are to share this, our strategy was as obvious as it seems. Forget about original speakers, don't let a replaced tranny run you off (we've never replaced one with a *Mercury* that didn't sound better than the original), and deliberately track down the fugliest old girls you can find from the tweed era. Busted baffle boards? We luv that....

Ricky-ticky cabinets are good, and the coverin' don't matter. What you want is a beater with a totally neglected chassis and as many of the original fat *Astron* caps and original resistor present as possible. Yeah, some of them may have to be replaced, but it's far better to allow a prudent and judicious amp tech determine that rather than buying an old amp that has been raped by a hard chargin' cowboy hooked on *Sprague Orange Drops*. Buy one of those and your old amp will sound new, never to sound old again, and that's most definitely not the play you want to make here. A little component drift is good.

There is luck involved, too... not all vintage amps were created equal. Some of them left the birthing bench endowed with incredible tone – a happy accident created by the melding of variable components that resulted in extraordinary sounds. Others were created by the same roll of the dice, but with a different outcome altogether – mysteriously dull, flat, or simply lacking whatever you wish to call it... *that tone*, mojo, bloom, the harmonic complexity of your first *Schlitz*, depth, fatness... *whatever*. To experience the blissful afterglow of unanticipated discovery, you must be willing to risk something, which is another way of saying that faith must be exercised in the absence of a guarantee. In this respect, buying old amps is a lot like life itself.... The greatest obstacle to discovery is the flawed perception of an impossible challenge. And the window of opportunity is closing on these great old amplifiers faster than you may think. Like vintage guitars, the best old amps are being taken out of circulation by collectors willing to pay prices that are based on *potential future value* (more than they are worth today, perhaps, but less than they will be worth tomorrow). For you, hombre, the time to bust a move is now. *Quest forth....* ▶

