

# the ToneQuest Report™

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone



## Bangers & Mash



Somewhere along the way, guitar amplifier tone got carelessly shoved into two broad categories – American and British. *Fender* being the quintessential American tone and *Marshall* being the obvious default for midrange and reverb-less British tone. Within each, of course, there are distinct variations... *Ampeg*, *Magnatone*, *Valco* and *Gibson*, for example, are also American through and through, yet they remain distinctly different in sound and construction, and would rarely be mistaken for a typical *Fender*. Among British amps, *Hiwatt*, *Sound City* and *Vox* present equally diverse varieties of “British” tone that won’t be confused with a classic *plexi Marshall* head. But simply adding reverb or delay to a British amplifier will often throw listeners completely off as to its origins, while plugging into the Normal channel of a vintage *Fender* brown or blackface amp with the right guitar can produce an exceptional “*Marshall* tone.” Our recent experiment with our ’62 brown *Vibrolux* and a *Goldtop Deluxe Les Paul* with *Lollar* mini humbuckers rammed this point home with alarming clarity.... The point is, labels don’t



always serve creativity and discovery well, and in the realm of supposed “vintage amp tone” where different examples can vary so dramatically, labels are worthless in generating much more than “skull chatter,” to quote *Kye Kennedy*. But, we still crave “*Marshall* tone,” whatever our individual perceptions of that sound may be. Well, since you asked....

The problem with classic vintage *Marshall* amps in 2008 is that the big ones are often too loud for modern sensibilities, and the smaller *Lead & Bass* or *PA20* models pushing dual *EL84s* basically do one thing. That one thing is a nice trick indeed, but perhaps not exactly a sound to pin yer signature ton on.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZT!

Yes, *Gear Page* wankers, we just did it again. Careful you don’t get a scab on that thing... it might get infected and fall off. We’ve unearthed two alternatives that will give you the bigger, bolder version of *Marshall* tone that you remember from your early *Jeff Beck Group*, *Zeppelin* and *Cream* albums, but at a volume level you can easily live with and actually enjoy in 2008

A reader alerted us to *Roy Blankenship*, oh, about a year ago, and it took that long to get an amp shipped for review and develop an interview. It was worth the wait. *Blankenship* builds a manageable range of custom amps in Hollywood, and he seems more interesting in building what he wants, the way he wants, than going big time.



We like that. So here’s an introductory dose of *Roy Blankenship* – an entertaining and frank fellow to be sure. Our review follows *Roy’s* interview.

**TQR:** Can you summarize your experience with electronics and guitar amps? How did you get started initially with mods and repairs, and how did that evolve into actually building your own amplifiers?

**RB:** First, I was born in California. My father worked for *North American Aviation*, and was transferred to Columbus, Ohio when I was 6 months old. Therefore, I was born crazy, but grew up normal. My father was a genius – he could build anything, and, in fact, he built my first guitar amp. It was a single-ended 6L6 design and had a field-coil speaker. It wasn’t loud enough to play in a band, but I still have it and it still works. I later discovered the cabinet he used was the extension speaker for an old film projector.

I started playing piano when I was 3, and played brass instruments in the school band. When I was a Junior in high school, I bought my first guitar. A *Kent* solid body, for \$49.95. I finally convinced my dad to let me buy a *Healthkit* 2x12 solid-state kit so that I could play out, and that was my first experience with electronic assembly. I was the guy in the band who would dick with all of the equipment. We bought some PA cabinets that had *JBL’s* in them, I refinished and rewired them, having no idea what I was doing, but it always worked. My dad had a whole workshop including lathe and drill press, so I often did small projects and repairs, like building my own speaker box to house two *Jensen* 6x9



speakers for the car. I wish I would have had the vision to go into production....

I was a hobbyist for the next 20 years, getting into tube hi-fi and going through a dozen *Dynaco Stereo 70s*, not knowing anything about them, but doing little stuff like biasing and tube exchanges. I was employed in the

music biz as a sales rep for four different firms, and the pinnacle of my career was as national sales manager of *Symetrix* in Seattle, WA. In 1991, I had a three-state sales territory selling body shop equipment. I stopped to see my friend, *Dan Abell* (of *Abell Audio*, 909 King Ave., Columbus, OH), best tech in the world, and drop off some octal sockets my dad had left me. Dan was all upset and expressed that his assistant had quit that day and he was in a bind because he had so much work. On a whim, I said, "Hire me. I have always loved this stuff."

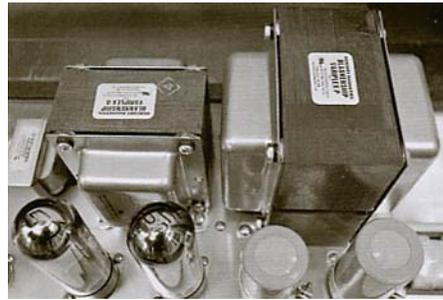
"Can you troubleshoot a circuit?" I said, "Not yet, but I have people skills and can do any number of things so that YOU can work." I knew his assistant wouldn't answer the phone or wait on customers, so, after the first day, Dan said, "Man, I can't believe how much I was able to get done. You're hired!"



Within two weeks, I was repairing circuits. The info that opened the door was the difference between negative and positive polarity transistors. We worked together for the next four and a half years, never an angry word between us. At one point, I wanted to live in California, so I went to a *NAMM* show and was hired by *Groove Tubes* as production manager. The learning curve was straight up – there is an incredible amount of information in that place. From there I started my own place in Santa Monica. To escape the chaos that is L.A., I moved to Florida to escape. I realized the repair biz was not a big money maker, so when two clients started encouraging me to build my own designs, I was up for it. We beat it around for a while, they finally ponied up and I built two EL84 amps. They loved them, I was shocked (they were nothing special), but they were the start. I still have number 1 that I bought



back from the third owner. My experience with amp repair changed when I came to L.A. People in Ohio and Florida were happy when their amps worked... players in California wanted their amps to sound good. That opened a whole new area of learning. About the same time, I was running into a lot of overly-modified amps that oscillated themselves to death, so I added "demodification" to my business card. People would call me back and say, "Man, this amp really sounds great now," and I would reply, "Yes, I made it stock." The only mods I deem worthy are tone-stack bypasses on *Fenders* and one of two master volume circuits that actually work well. They each allow you to attenuate volume without losing everything, and they both originated with *Ken Fischer*, amp guru, God rest his soul. Tube amplifier technology stabilized in the mid '60s, and very few amp builders have done anything innovative since that time. In order to separate myself from the pack, I wanted to improve on the existing circuits. When these amps were made, people were playing clean, now everyone wants to crank them up, and in order for them to deliver, my belief is that they need a stiffer power supply. I get a lot of comments on how "loud" my amps are for a given wattage rating. One client said, "I have played a lot of these amps, they give up when you hit them, but yours sounds like a big amp."



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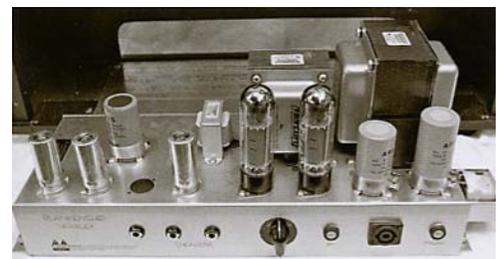
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**TQR:** Describe the different models you build in terms of features, construction and tone, how they differ from vintage or other custom built amps, and what you specifically wanted to accomplish and/or improve on with each model.

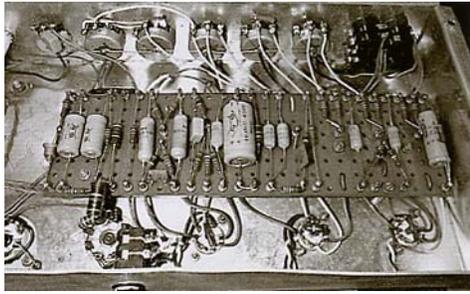
**RB:** I build my own take on American and British circuits, and I employ a stiffer power supply than most. I am currently using turret and eyelet board construction, but a printed circuit board can be useful if made properly. The compromises made by volume manufacturers is where the "circuit board-is-bad" myth started.

Proper CAD design can lend itself to a quieter, more reliable product as long as the bean counters don't try to take a nickel out of it at every turn. All of my current product is hand-wired, and as you know, there is a lot of snob appeal and dick-measuring in this business. For example, some of my clients wonder why I do not use *ClaroStat* potentiometers... I have tested all of these devices, and I have never had a bad *Alpha* pot, but the *ClaroStats* I ordered for testing were 50% defective!



In the *Leeds* amp, I went with different trannies than most and a stiffer power supply; this gives it more beef. In the

*Fatboy*, I discovered an output tranny that would allow me to use 6V6's (for 15 watts) or 6L6's (for 25 watts) without changing the speaker load. Though the tranny was originally designed for an 8 ohm load, it actually worked more efficiently at 16.



Overall, using **Mercury** trannies has been one of the best decisions of this whole venture. Now when I hear an amp with any other tranny, they sound flat. I took one of my amps to visit a friendly competitor, he played it and enjoyed it, then fired up his own amp, and it sounded flat. He was looking at his amp as if, "Hey, what's going on here?" I think that was his first side-by-side comparison and he could hear the difference, much to his own chagrin.

**TQR:** What inspired the use of a Variac with the *VariPlex*? Why not just build a master volume circuit?

**RB:** We wanted to create a cranked-up *Marshall* sound at lower volumes, but people have time and again expressed their dissatisfaction with the attenuators on the market and the smashed sound of a bad master volume circuit. I credit *Dave Friedman* of *Rack Systems* with the concept and the prototyping. We tried five different kinds of coupling caps, different types and brands of resistors, different trannies... you name it. *Eddie Van Halen* popularized the whole *Variac* concept, so we modified the circuit so you could go from full tilt boogie down to 1 watt and the amp would not shut off. We have sold 40 of those amps with no marketing other than clips on a forum. We are now introducing a similar amp with a master volume for those who want it whisper quiet, but saturated. There are two master volume circuits that I know of that sound great even when turned down to speaking levels. We are using one of those and a few other mods in the new model, the *Custom 45*.



**TQR:** You describe a process on your web site in which you A/B'd the *VariPlex* with a friend's '68 *Plexi* and you didn't stop tweaking the design until 10 out of 10 guitarists chose the *VariPlex* in a blind test. Can you elaborate on how those tests progressed and the changes to the circuit that you made to achieve those results?

**RB:** I could, but I won't.

**TQR:** In your experience, how much variation in tone and component values, including transformers, have you observed in vintage *Marshall* amps? Isn't it necessary to listen to a lot of different examples and then choose an exceptional amp as a benchmark?

**RB:** Yes. We already had "the Holy Grail" *plexi* in house, so we compared to that one. Most amps will respond to love,

but there are some that are just exceptional. The reason for this amp-to-amp variance is manufacturing tolerances. If your trannies are built with plus or minus 20% tolerances, that means your amp could vary as much as 40% from sample to sample.

**TQR:** The *VariPlex* doesn't sound "new" in the sense that it isn't shrill or bright and sharp like some replica *Marshall* amps. How did you accomplish this?

**RB:** That's my secret.

**TQR:** How long is the wait for one of your amps once it has been ordered?

**RB:** We have *Carry-Ons* in stock for the first time. Generally, we like to say 3-4 weeks just to be safe. Most of this is the gray area of vendor delivery on cabinets.

**TQR:** What's ahead? What do you want to accomplish in the future?

**RB:** I want to be a thorn in someone's side so they will offer a butt load of dough, I will sign a non-compete, and go away. Then, I can sit on the beach and light my cigars with \$100 bills and sip *pina colodas*. The funniest thing about that picture is that I don't drink OR smoke. Actually, we are introducing a bass amp shortly. As we gain more exposure, I am sure we will have enough to do. I am happy with people's response to my products. I do not want to get huge, and I will probably not offer many more models – it gets too confusing. But thanks for considering me as a worthy contributor to your magazine.

[www.BlankenshipAmps.com](http://www.BlankenshipAmps.com)  
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Our experience with "vintage *Marshall* tone" was formed with two stout examples that we

were fortunate enough to own and play for years. The first was actually a late '60 *Park* '75 50 watt head, followed by a metal panel 1969 *Marshall* 50 watt. Both amps displayed the classic tone, smooth distortion and touch-sensitive dynamics we love to love and eagerly oozed the warmth and dimensionality that reissues lack. This isn't complicated.... We'd simply drag a newish *Marshall* clone of some sort into the music room, compare its sound to the old one and invariably say, "Not bad, but this one sounds and *feels* better."

When we fired up the *Blankenship*, however, not only did it sound richer and fuller with more depth than our old *Marshall*s, but the tone controls actually produce changes in EQ that allowed the amp to achieve a level of versatility that has always been sorely lacking in the originals. And then, of course, there is the nifty *Variac* that allows the *VariPlex* to be

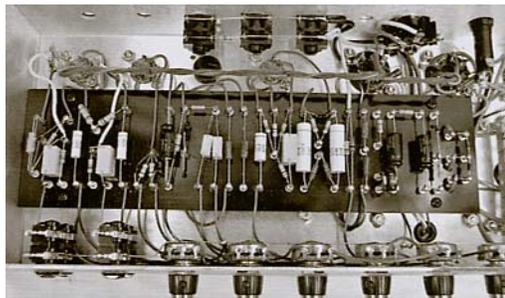
played at nominal volume levels with no audible deterioration in the responsiveness or tone and the amp. Essentially equipped with features that mirror an original *Plexi*, the *VariPlex* is a 2 channel/4 input design with presence, bass, mid and treble controls. Channel 1 is the bright input; channel 2 is more bassy, and the two can be jumpered and mixed to taste.

We took our time developing an impression of the *VariPlex*, playing it for over two months. Bottom line – it produces an authentic, old-school *Marshall* voice with better EQ, clarity,



and fresher, more vivid harmonic content. Its voice is exceptionally smooth, yet capable of

acquiring the melancholy edginess of an early *Clapton* recording by simply managing EQ, and the Variac as a master volume control works brilliantly. The *VariPlex* impressed us as a near-perfect example of an overbuild, hand-wired, low-production amp inspired by arguably the best efforts of *Jim Marshall* and company, circa 1968. Just as the *Balls M18*



became our modern benchmark for low-powered, classic *Marshall* tone, so goes the *Blankenship VariPlex* in the 50-watt range. If there is a better-sounding modern alternative to a vintage *Marshall*, we have yet to hear it.

We also admired the neat, clean and easy-to-read design of the *VariPlex* silver control panel, somewhat reminiscent of our old Park. Among all the clones being cloned with *Mojo* boxes, this amp is a visual standout. And as far as internal build quality is concerned, let the pictures speak for themselves. In all respects the *VariPlex* is a solid piece of work, returned to the builder with as much regret as any amp we have ever reviewed. In fact, we're still thinking about it. Plex forth....