

SMALL CHA-CHING, BIG BLING

The Mercury Magnetics Valve Junior Mod Kit

Last year, *Epiphone* tossed a small pebble into a large pond with the introduction of its *Valve Junior* amplifiers—and its launch caused a tsunami. Available as a stand-alone head or a 1x8” combo, the *Junior* was as basic as an amp could be for something that still produced sound. With just two tubes, two transformers, one speaker, an input jack, and a volume knob, when a player plugged into one, there was very little to get between their guitar and their ear. And the *Junior* turned out to be a very good-sounding amp. It’s doubtful that any owner of a pre-’67 *Fender Champ* sold it after hearing the little *Epi*, but for under \$140 for the combo and only \$99 for the head, the *Junior* was definitely the steal of the day.

Paul Smith of *Mercury Magnetics* was harassed into purchasing a *Junior* by a journalist who insisted that if Smith didn’t agree it was the best-sounding amp he’d heard for anywhere near the asking price, said journalist would eat said amp.

Smith agreed, then he hauled the *Epi* into his office. *Mercury’s* Sergio Hamernik and Alan Cyr of *The Amp Exchange*, in Los Angeles, mercilessly dissected the helpless *Junior* for weeks before deciding on the optimum power and output transformers and choke.

“We didn’t follow any established recipes for getting tone,” Sergio said of the development of the components. “It’s not a *Champ* or a ‘me-too’ thing. All we were interested in was getting a tone that a musician would find inspiring.”

The kit *Mercury* devised has new output and power transformers, a choke added to the circuit, a CD-ROM with

photographic, step-by-step instructions for do-it-yourselfers, bolts and locking nuts to attach the choke to the chassis, four or five capacitors (depending on the version), five resistors and 10” of 18-gauge insulated solid copper wire.

The *Mercury Magnetics’* transformers, well, transformed the miniscule *Epiphone*. Side by side with a stocker, the *Mercury*-modded combo has way more presence. It breaks up a little earlier, and the harmonics are much more rich and even. Also, while the stock

Junior had a slightly brittle or metallic edge to the distortion (especially after 12 o’clock on the volume knob), the *Mercury* mini monster stayed smooth all the way up to being dimed.

In addition to helping design the mod, Cyr installs the kit at his business. After installing nearly four dozen of the kits, Alan says that at least half of the mods are for professional musicians and go right to a recording studio from his shop.

“People tell me that they actually record better than their vintage amps,” says Alan. “Once someone hears the amp, they have a job for it. It’s a pretty easy sell; the modded amp sells itself, really. You wouldn’t believe the boutique amps musicians bring in to A/B against the *Epiphone* with the *Mercury* kit. They usually end up buying the *Epiphone*.” Alan charges about \$150 for installation in addition to the cost of the amp and the kit. The cost can go up if other modifications are requested, and he figures that it would take an average amp tech about two or three hours to do the work.

Gary Roudenko, who sells *Valve Juniors* modded by Alan Cyr at *The Amp Shop* in Sherman Oaks, California, agrees with Alan that there’s little work in making the sale. “Whoever hears it wants to buy it,” says Gary.

Mercury Magnetics Valve Jr. Mod Kit Price: \$289 (combo kit)/\$299 (head kit). Contact Mercury Magnetics, 9167 Independence Ave., Chatsworth, CA 91311; phone (818) 998-7791; www.mercurymagnetics.com. The Amp Shop, 13701 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks, CA 91423; phone (818) 386-5500. The Amp Exchange (Alan Cyr), Los Angeles, CA; phone (818) 345-2795, www.amp-exchange.com.



The *Mercury*-modded *Epiphone Valve Junior* is on virtually all the time in my home studio. If my place caught fire, it would be one of the first things I’d drag out to the sidewalk before the guys in the red trucks showed up, despite its low cost.

-- Bob Dragich

