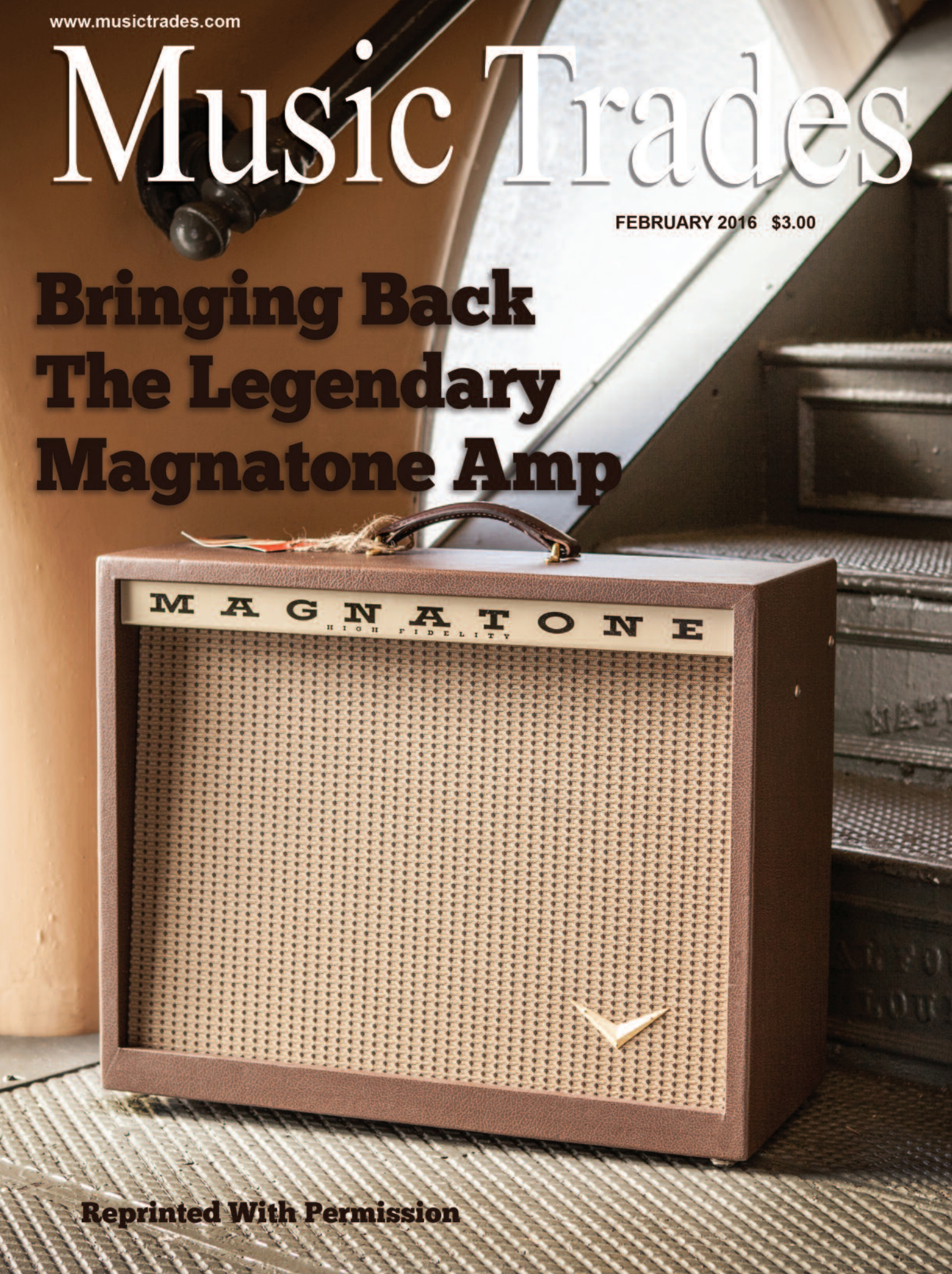
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Bringing Back The Legendary Magnatone Amp



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Bringing Back The Magnatone

The amp made famous by Buddy Holly is back, updated, and endorsed by Neil Young, Jeff Beck, & Billy Gibbons



The Magnatone team, Dave Ryan, master builder; Obeid Khan, v.p. engineering/operations; Ted Kornblum, president & CEO; Chris Villani, production manager.

LIKE EVERY OTHER BOUTIQUE manufacturer, Magnatone proudly boasts of the epic tone quality of its hand-built tube amps. However, the ringing endorsement of some of the most influential guitarists of the past four decades elevates these lofty claims above the status of mere promotional hype. Magnatone amps are currently on stage and in the studio with Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, Neil Young and Jeff Beck. Each of these guitar icons has his own distinct style and tonal signature, but all three have been notoriously demanding about the amps they use, and have long had a pronounced affinity for vintage gear. Their respect for new Magnatones is as potent a stamp of approval as any manufacturer could ask for.

Ted Kornblum, president and CEO, has poured working capital and vision into resurrecting the Magnatone brand and considers the support of Gibbons, Young, and Beck as validation of the Magnatone product line, and his entire plan, which could be summarized as: manufacture in the USA, seek great players and invite their input in product development, and then make the once famous Magnatone brand better than ever.

Ted says, "I watched a lot of famous amplifier companies outsource their production to Asia, either to hit a lower price point or to improve margins. The dollars may have added up, but the products lost their soul." With Magnatone, he says, "I decided to do the exact opposite and in-source manufacturing here in the USA, use the best domestic parts, and build a product that will stand the test of time alongside the best vintage amps we all love."

Kornblum's Magnatone Company is technically new, and the amps have been designed from the ground up to be better than ever. And they continue to feature the "pitch shifting vibrato" effect that Magnatone patented around 1956. But the Magnatone name traces back to the very beginnings of the electric guitar era. In fact, Magnatone amps pre-date just about every other amp manufacturer, including Fender. Although Magnatone faded from the scene around 1969, it was an important pioneer.

The Magnatone story dates back to the peak of the Hawaiian music craze in the early 1930s. Delbert Dickerson's daughter had been pestering him for a lap steel guitar and amp. Since he couldn't afford one of the pricey new Rickenbacker "frying pans," he decided to build one himself. The machinist used the skills he acquired watching his father build guitars, and managed to put together a slick and functional guitar and amp package. Sol Ho'opi'i, a popular Hawaiian guitarist at the time,

was sufficiently impressed and asked Dickerson to build him one. More orders followed, Dickerson ramped up production, and by the late 1930s Dickerson Musical Instrument Manufacturing Company was a thriving concern in Los Angeles. Even today, Dickerson amps, distinguished by their colorful faux mother-of-pearl coverings, are coveted by collectors.

Simultaneously, in Torrance, California, just a few miles from Dickerson's operation, Arthur DuHammell launched Magna Electronics, building a line of portable vacuum tube radios and phonographs. One of the company's specialties was a coin-operated radio that was installed in motels. He saw guitars and amps as the perfect complement to his product offering and in 1946 acquired Dickerson's business.

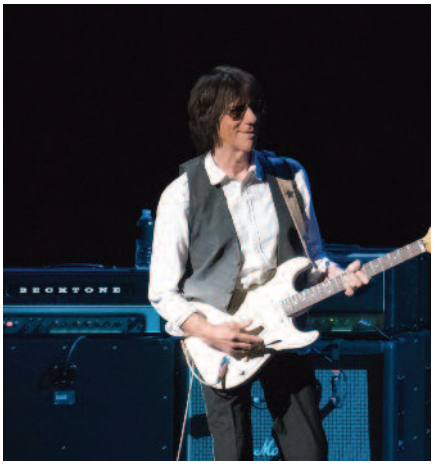
By the early 1950s, the original Dickerson guitars and amps had undergone a redesign and were rebranded with the Magnatone name. DuHammell stressed innovation, patenting a pitch shifting vibrato circuit (vibrato modulates frequency, not to be confused with tremolo, which involves amplitude modulation). Magnatone was also known for creating striking art-deco cabinet cosmetics that received design awards from the Los Angeles Museum of Art. Notable Magnatone players from this era included Tommy Tedesco, Robert Ward, Buddy Holly, Bo Diddley and Lonnie Mack.

In 1957, Magnatone hired Paul Bigsby, creator of the famous Bigsby mechanical vibrato and designer of the highly collectible Bigsby electric guitars. In addition, they hired Paul Barth, formally one of the designers of Rickenbacker guitars, to design a line of Magnatone guitars and basses.

The baby boom, the birth of rock 'n' roll, and an expanding economy fueled rapid growth in the music industry in the early 1960s, which attracted the interest of outside investors who were confident that big profits could be had by applying "professional management discipline" to musical instrument making. This rationale prompted a slew of transactions. CBS broadcasting acquired Fender, Thomas Organ Company took over Vox amplifiers, Ampeg amplifiers were absorbed into a conglomerate called Unimusic, and Magnatone had a series of owners, including the Estey Organ Company of Brattleboro, Vermont. The specifics of each deal differed, but the outcomes were all disappointingly similar. Even though Fender survived, CBS ownership still draws criticism. Vox and Ampeg went into a tailspin, and remained dormant for years. As for Magnatone, production ceased in 1969 and the brand lay dormant until Ted Kornblum decided to revive it.







Magnatone amps are currently being used by Billy Gibbons, top right, with Ted Kornblum at the company operations in St Lous; Jeff Beck. amd Neil Young.

AN ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY

Ted Kornblum grew up in the music industry. His grandfather, Bernard Kornblum, founded St. Louis Music Company in 1922 and his father Gene dramatically expanded the business by creating the Alvarez guitar and Crate amplifier lines. He also revived the defunct Ampeg brand. By the time Ted was a teenager, he was handling artist relations for St. Louis Music, successfully signing endorsements with Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead, David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash, and numerous other notable players. He eventually joined the family business full time after spending a few years working at Modulus Guitar in San Francisco, and working for Hyman Peller at On The Road Marketing. He also earned an MBA from The University of Denver.

St. Louis Music had been the distributor of Magnatone from the 1940s until the brand was shuttered around 1969. One day as Ted was thumbing through

old catalogs from the past, he stumbled across a presentation of Magnatone products. The cosmetics struck a chord and he began digging deeper into Magnatone history. The trademarks had been abandoned, so he registered them, even though initially he had no clear idea of what to do with them.

As his interest grew, Ted acquired a sprawling collection of Magnatone products from every era, effectively buying back the company history. Of the 400 Magnatone products he has acquired, he says, "Everything they made had incredible style. From lap steel and solid body electric guitars to coin-operated radios to portable tube record players, as well as guitar amps, they all have this incredibly cool vibe. It's been like a treasure hunt finding these gems of musical history."

When the Kornblum family sold St. Louis Music to Loud Technologies in 2005, Ted stayed on for a few years managing artist relations for the enterprise. (Today, Magnatone has no affiliation with Loud Technologies or St. Louis Music.) But before long, Ted decided it was time to start reviving Magnatone.

His first step was to assemble a "dream team" of engineers who had worked at the manufacturing and engineering facility in St. Louis for Ampeg. These engineers were called in as needed for specific skills, but the core engineers prior to going to market included Dan Ryterski, Greg Geerling, George McKale, Gregg Hopkins, Ken Matthews, and Obeid Khan.



Artist input has been essential at every stage of Magnatone product development. Above, Obeid Kahn demos a prototype to (l-r) Gregg Hopkins; Elwood Francis, Billy Gibbon's guitar tech; and Billy Gibbons.

IMPROVING THE ORIGINAL

Obeid brought an unusual skill set to the task at Magnatone. With an engineering degree, he understood many vintage circuit designs; he also brought experience as a great guitar player in his own right. In addition to his formal training, he had some unique practical insights, having learned from stints playing guitar on the road, and working at amp repair shops in the St. Louis area repairing and "hot-rodding" tube amps. It was Gene Kornblum who first recognized Obeid's blend of formal and practical experience, and hired him to work on Ampeg tube amps.

For Obeid, Magnatone and Ampeg represented similar challenges: how to recreate the essence of the original amp, but in a package better suited for contemporary guitarists. He says of the 1950s and early 1960s Magnatones, "They were great sounding amps with a vintage vibe, but they were limited in their usage and did not have enough power to keep up. The cabinets were fragile, the '50s-era speakers didn't reproduce the best tone, and the chassis was packed so tight, they were prone to bending. They weren't roadworthy." He set out to make them better in every way.

Correcting the deficiencies of the original Magnatones first required benchmarking the sound and tones of some of the best vintage amps already out there. Then it involved securing top-quality components made in the USA. Components were then handwired at a St. Louis plant and installed in solid pine and plywood, finger-jointed cabinets. The result is an all-new, high performance amp with a vintage vibe.

One of the major obstacles was finding authentic varisters, the crucial component of the patented vibrato circuitry. Varistors had previously been used for voltage controlled surge suppression to stabilize television pictures tubes. These days, they are made primarily for high voltage industrial applications. Getting varistors built to the original Magnatone specs took over a year to find the right supplier and silicon carbide materials. "We could have used a digital alternative as a substitute for varistors," says Ted, "but the amp purists would have rejected it. We wanted to keep the vibrato authentic to the original patent."

As Obeid began building prototypes, Ted solicited the input from his many artist friends to make sure their designs were headed in the right direction. Neil Young has been a long-time user from the '70s, and to this day still plays his vintage Magnatone Model 280. Larry Cragg, who served as Neil Young's chief tech for 32 years, was eager to help evaluate the prototypes of what became Magnatone's Traditional Collection. At every stage of the prototype process, Ted described him as "the gatekeeper. Everything had to get by Larry first," he says.

Cragg says of the development process, "Ted came to me and asked, 'If you were king, what would you do?' He told me the sky was the limit. I knew what I wanted and it took a long time before we finally nailed it, but we did, and it sounds as good as anything I've ever heard." Neil Young apparently feels the same way, as he's been using two new Magnatone Twilighter models as an addition to his longtime rig, and all can been heard on the "Promise of the Real" Tour in 2015 and into 2016. Neil is performing with a new Stereo Twilighter 2x12" combo and also Twilighter 1x12"



The Magnatone Tradition Series and the Master Series amps.

combo from the Magnatone Traditional Collection.

As an alternative to the sound of early rock 'n' roll, Ted felt the brand needed an amp offering a classic British sound as well and began working with longtime friend Billy Gibbons to develop a line that would complement the Traditional Collection. As a self-described "gear fanatic," Gibbons is a connoisseur of the British amp sounds, having recorded most ZZ Top's hits using a 1968 Marshall Super Lead. "If I could pick one player to work with in designing British-sounding amps, it would be Mr. Gibbons," says Ted. "Billy toured with Magnatone prototypes in various stages of completion to help us refine the look and sound of the models." Elwood Francis, Gibbons's longtime guitar tech, was also involved, making several visits to the Magnatone shop with Gibbons.

BUILT TO TAKE A BEATING

The result of this collaboration is the Magnatone Super Fifty-Nine in the Master Collection. This model is offered in a head or combo configuration and uses EL-34 power tubes, and has a master volume and effects loop, features not found on the Traditional models. The Super Fifty-Nine also has vibrato and tremolo effects. Jeff Beck came on board in 2015 after he experienced Magnatone amps firsthand—Billy introduced Magnatone to Jeff during rehearsals for a combined ZZ Top and Jeff Beck tour.

Getting the right tone was only part of the process. Tube amps have a reputation for being fragile and finicky. To create a truly road-worthy product, Ted asked Bob Dixon, who has an amp repair shop in Los Angeles and is a "tube amp repairman to the stars," to evaluate pre-production prototypes for any potentially vulnerable designs or components. "We wanted to get a repairman's perspective on service concerns so we could address them before going into final production," Ted says. Gregg Hopkins, of Vintage Amp Restoration in St. Louis, Missouri was also enlisted in design and prototyping speaker cabinetry. "The goal," Ted says, "has been to make Magnatone's last for a lifetime."

Magnatone amps were re-introduced to the world at the 2013 NAMM show three years ago, and production started in earnest immediately after. Since then, about 35 key retailers in the U.S.A. have been authorized to carry the line, and sales have increased every month. International retailers have been coming on board now that all models have received electrical and safety certification to ship worldwide.

Industry veteran Fred Coyner joined the Magnatone team as director of worldwide sales in early 2015 after representing high-end amp lines such as Matchless, Bogner, and Bad Cat. Says Fred, "Magnatone is very unique. It was dormant for years, only to come back to life with models today better than ever. Our dealers tell me that Magnatone is the finest line they carry. It's also a very profitable line. Hearing true stereo pitch shifting vibrato for the first time inspires players to sit down and check it out."

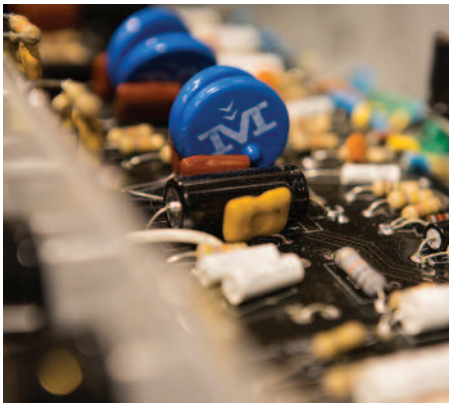
Magnatone amps are currently handcrafted in a small workshop in St. Louis, Missouri. The fanatical attention to detail that guided the design process is also evident in the final construction. Skilled builders Chris Villani, Dave Ryan, and Diane Villani along with Obeid Khan, personally hand wire perfectly braided harnesses to tube sockets and align components with meticulously clean solder joints. And they install the sturdy, aesthetically pleasing chassis in equally elegant cabinets. Instead of using traditional Tolex-type cabinet covering, all Magnatone cabinets boast the same 100% cotton backed textile material used for covering fine books. It offers a pleasing, distinctive look, and Ted says, "It might even be more durable than Tolex. And as the amp ages, it looks even better…like a nice worn-in pair of jeans." The amp handle is choice leather, handcrafted by Amish saddle makers, and the dust cover is made from the same material used for luxury convertible soft car tops. The 14-carat gold chevron that adorns the vintage brown grill cloth on the Traditional Collection even has a glass beaded matte finish, so it won't reflect light on stage.

Magnatone amps aren't cheap. But Ted says, "All our amps look as good as they sound. Using both parts and labor from the USA, we have created a luxury brand. So when you buy a Magnatone, you're going to get the best of everything and want to keep it forever."

NO FREE AMPS

Neil Young and other artists who currently play the new models have purchased them. "No one gets free amps," Ted says. "Artists like our amps, and they have no problem paying for the quality."

The Magnatone product lineup is divided into two product families. The Traditional Collection features brown and gold cosmetics, harkening back to the 1950s-era when Magnatone was the choice of Buddy Holly. Models include the Single V head or combo that has a pair of 6L6 power tubes and can stand up to any vintage tweed amps from the





Details make the different: from classic "varisters," used in Magnatone's patented vibrato circuit, to handmade leather hands, Maganatone amps are designed to perform for the long run.

'50s. The Twilighter 1x12" 22-watt amp features a pair of 6V6 power tubes, and the Twilighter Stereo 2x12" stereo combo has dual output transformers and power amps—making it 44 watts of power. All the above models have reverb, tremolo and vibrato. New for 2016 is the Panoramic Stereo 2x10" combo, with single-ended 6L6 power tubes, reverb, tremolo and vibrato in a compact and lightweight package.

Since Ted is not a fan of channel switching amps, the Master Collection boasts models with British-type tubes and features a Master Volume control for added versatility. Also unique to the Master Collection are distinctive automotive-styled cabinet cosmetics with wrap-around grille, custom-tooled knobs, and an illuminated logo using old school, warm incandescent bulbs. The Super Fifty-Nine uses a pair of EL-34 power tubes and is available in a 45-watt all-tube head, with a 2x12" ext. speaker cabinet, as well as in a combo configuration. Ted emphasizes, "These are not clones of anything; they are genuine Magnatone amps." Jeff Beck, Billy Gibbons, and Jason Isbell are all currently playing these models.

New for 2016 is the Super Fifty-Nine Mk. 2 that is a lower-gain version of the Mk. 1 and is available in standard black levant covering, or limited-edition cream colored cosmetics, as seen with Billy Gibbons on his "Perfectomundo" tour.

Ted describes his company as more than an amplifier maker. Magnatone is a luxury brand that he can eventually extend into additional market segments, including consumer electronics and high-fidelity audio products like record players and tube audio devices. He says, "We're just getting started with this, but there's no question that the Magnatone brand can be much more than guitar amplifiers." Billy Gibbons probably says it best: "What Ted Kornblum and his team have accomplished—resurrecting the Magnatone brand and tone—is not just a success story. It's a case study in design and execution of excellence."

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