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THE VOX STORY

WHAT WOULD THE BRITISH INVASION HAVE BEEN WITHOUT VOX? THE GOLDEN YEARS OF ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED MANUFACTURERS OF AMPS, GUITARS, AND EFFECTS IS DOCUMENTED IN THIS COVER STORY FROM OCTOBER 2007.

10 THINGS YOU GOTTA DO TO PLAY LIKE **DANNY GATTON**

PLUS!
THE EVER-POPULAR TRUEFIRE SESSIONS.

SUPER BONUS!
THREE COMPLETE SONG TRANSCRIPTIONS



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BRITISH INVASION!

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF VOX

By ART THOMPSON

AS ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC NAMES IN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS and amplifiers, Vox played a huge role in creating the shimmering guitar sounds that galvanized a generation of young music fans in the 1960s. Vox amplifiers, guitars, organs, effects, and P.A. gear were used by the Shadows, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Yardbirds, the Kinks, and practically every other British Invasion group to score hits on either side of the Atlantic. Vox amps gave the top players in England a definitive sound, and what Brit could resist a product line whose image was as down home as Beefeaters and Buckingham Palace? From the gold trim and diamond-pattern grilles of its classy AC30 amplifiers to the futuristic shapes of its Phantom series guitars and basses, Vox gear evoked a certain élan that couldn't have emerged from muleskinner America.

october 2007

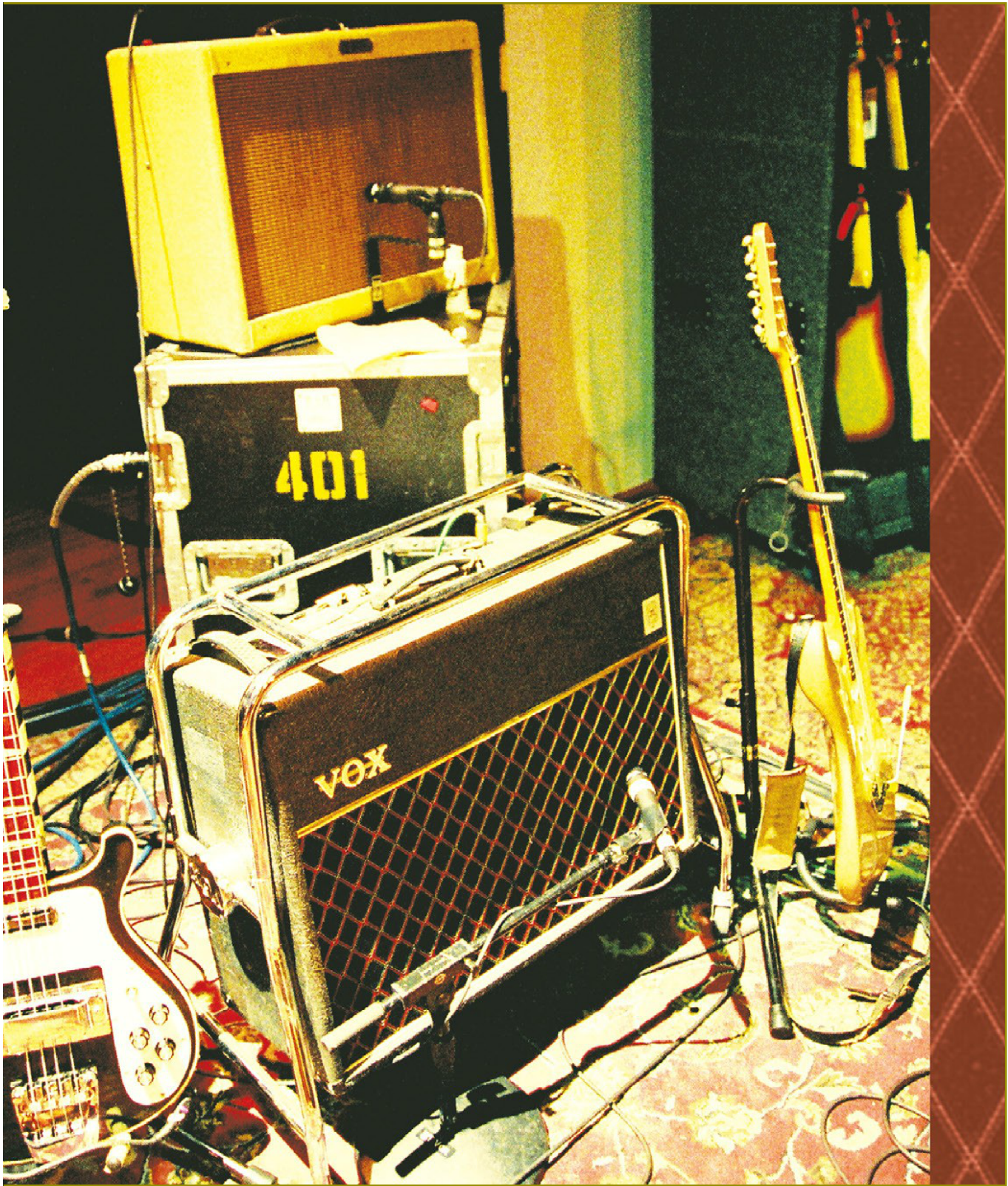


PHOTO: PAMELA LITTKY / RETNA LTD.



British sterling—an amazing collection of vintage Vox amps.



A recreation of Dick Denney's late-'50s workshop (far left).

Vox founder Tom Jennings (left) and chief engineer Dick Denney, circa 1967.

Before the swinging sounds of the British Invasion captured the world's imagination, Vox was a fairly low-key operation—just one of many trying to survive the economic hardships of post-war Britain. The Vox name actually originated in 1951, with the advent of a primitive keyboard instrument called the Univox (Latin for “single voice”). It was the brainchild of Tom Jennings, who started in the music business in 1946 as a dealer in used instruments, and an importer of accordions and guitars from France and Germany. Acting on pure faith that a small, monophonic keyboard fitted with an amp and speaker would be something that people would want, Jennings hired a technician named Derek Underdown to design the Univox. The instrument became popular with solo musicians who worked the English pub scene, and it carried JMI (Jennings Musical Instruments; the name changed to Jennings Musical Industries in 1957) along until the next opportunity for a new product came to Jennings' attention.

With the sudden popularity of skiffle groups around 1955, Jennings realized he needed a guitar amplifier to grow his business. The conditions were especially ripe due to Britain's restrictions on imports from America, and though he had talented people working for him, Jennings felt he needed to look outside JMI for a suitable design. When a guitarist/electronics technician named Dick Denney came to his shop to show him a 15-watt 1x12 guitar amp he'd made, Jennings hired him to develop it further. With input from Underdown—JMI's chief engineer at the time—the amp was brought from prototype stage to a design that was rugged and reliable enough for real-world use.

The AC15 (actually called AC1/15) was introduced in January 1958, and it was the first commercially successful amplifier that JMI put into production under the Vox name. It used

a Goodmans 12" speaker, and had a square, TV front-style cabinet covered in cream/diamond-patterned Rexene (a '40s-era grained covering material) with lattice-pattern diamond grillecloth. The control panel was black, and it featured round cream-colored knobs. The first AC15s had a 12AX7 in the front end, and used two EL84 output tubes and a 5Z4 rectifier.

The timing of the AC15's launch coincided with the surging popularity of rock and roll in England, and JMI benefited greatly when the Shadows started using AC15s. Gerry Marsden of Gerry and the Pacemakers also played through a two-tone grey AC15—a color scheme that was introduced in 1960. The AC15 was updated with an EF86 in the preamp, and an EZ81 rectifier that year, and, in late 1960, the amp received the two-section aluminum/steel chassis that JMI used throughout the 1960s.

The AC15 gave Vox its most important success—a signature sound. Guitarists loved its chiming clean tones, as well as its mild compression and sweet distortion characteristics when overdriven. To make the amp more suitable for larger venues, Vox introduced the AC15 Twin—sporting two Goodmans speakers—in 1962. By that time, however, a new Vox amplifier had already become the number-one choice for many of Britain's top groups.

THE AC30

Originally conceptualized as a “twin” AC15, the AC30 retained several important circuit elements of its little brother: an EF86 in the front end, EL84 power tubes running in cathode bias (this time, four of them), and no negative feedback in the output stage. The use of negative feedback in amplifier design was a technique developed specifically to suppress harmonics generated by the power stage,



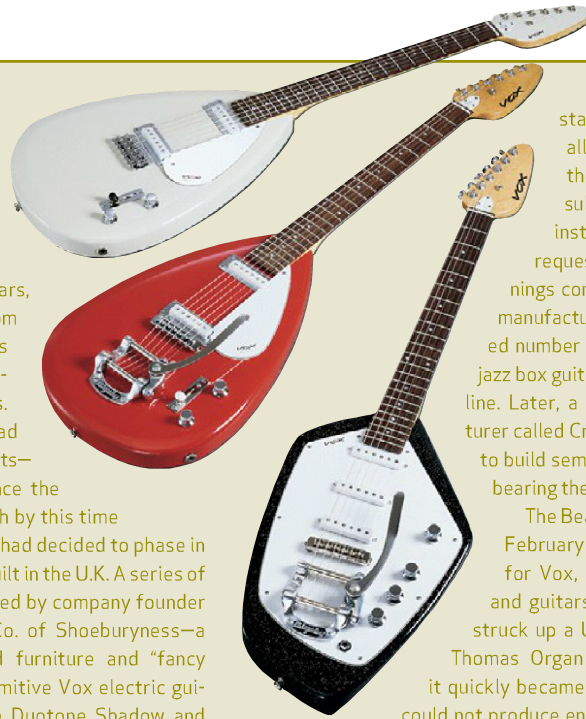
VOX GUITARS

When musicians talk about Vox guitars, images of the wild-shaped Vox Phantom and Teardrop guitars from the mid '60s come to mind. But the story of Vox guitars actually dates back to the late '50s. Jennings Musical Instruments Ltd. had distributed a variety of musical instruments—including European-made guitars—since the early '50s, but by late 1959, JMI (which by this time was called Jennings Musical Industries) had decided to phase in their own line of Vox electric guitars built in the U.K. A series of budget model electrics were outsourced by company founder Tom Jennings to Stuart Darkins & Co. of Shoeburyness—a woodworking factory that produced furniture and “fancy goods.” The result was a series of primitive Vox electric guitars with model names such as the Ace, Duotone, Shadow, and Stroller. These crude, basic instruments were built for beginners and amateur musicians, and were intended to compete with inexpensive electrics made by rival British distributors like Rosetti, Dallas, Selmer, and Watkins.

By early 1961, Jennings hired a team of guitar builders including Bob Pearson, Ken Wilson, and Mick Bennett to make Vox guitars at the Jennings factory in Dartford, Kent. The first new high-end Vox models were the Escort and Consort. This was the first in a series of serious steps made by Jennings to produce high-quality electric guitars.

In an effort to carve out his own identity in the guitar market, Jennings had visions of a new guitar design like no other. According to writer Martin Kelly, whose painstaking research has uncovered a great deal of new information for his upcoming book on Vox guitars, Jennings commissioned a self-employed graphic artist to design a unique looking guitar. The result was the asymmetrical, coffin-shaped Vox Phantom that was first launched in October of 1961, and not in 1963, as is commonly believed. For the first two years of production, Phantom guitars were hand built in the Dartford factory. The original Phantom guitars featured metal pickup covers, a larger headstock, and a different vibrato system than the ones that were later produced. This guitar is referred to as the Phantom Mark I. It is estimated that only 150 of these original Phantom Mark I guitars were ever made. Vox redesigned the Phantom in 1963, and set up for mass production of the Phantom Mark II. Jennings had all the guitar parts outsourced, and then brought back in to the Dartford factory where the final Vox guitars were assembled.

By 1964, the British music scene was exploding with bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Dave Clark Five, and the Hollies—all of whom used Vox amplifiers. Jennings



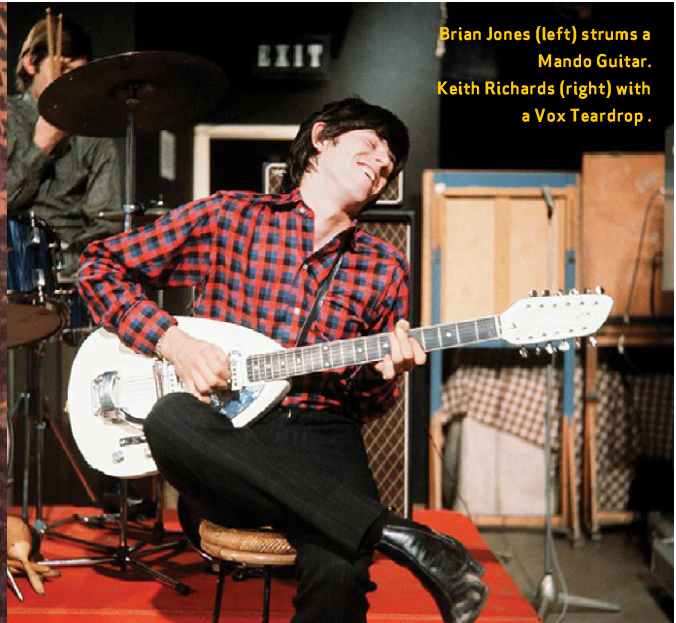
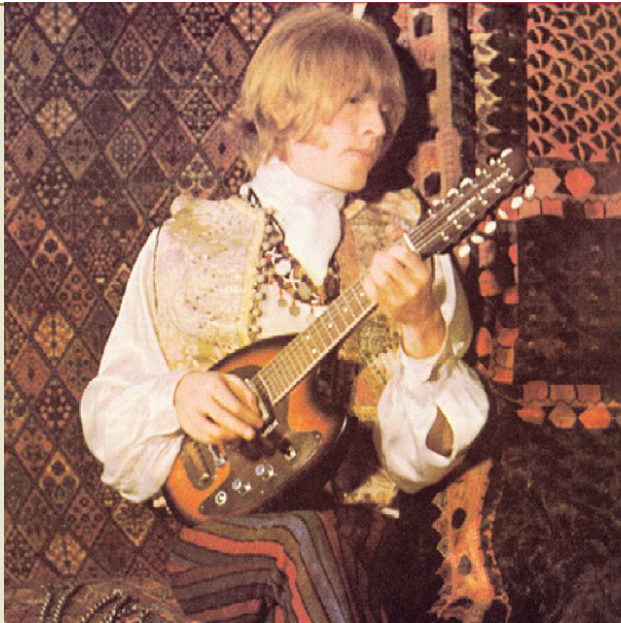
started to pitch Vox guitars to all the major acts, which made them immensely popular, and resulted in a huge demand for the instruments. To keep up with the request for more Vox guitars, Jennings contacted Welson, a small Italian manufacturer who began building a limited number of inexpensive single-cutaway jazz box guitars that were added to the Vox line. Later, a larger Italian guitar manufacturer called Crucianelli was hired by Jennings to build semi-hollow electric guitar models bearing the Vox name.

The Beatles' first visit to the states in February of 1964 changed everything for Vox, and the demand for its amps and guitars was overwhelming. Jennings struck up a U.S. distribution deal with the Thomas Organ Company of California, and it quickly became clear that the British factory could not produce enough guitars for the American market, let alone the world. To keep up with the ever-increasing demand, Jennings contracted with EKO, the largest guitar manufacturer in Italy. When EKO took over, they started reproducing the Crucianelli models for Vox, as well as many of the British models. The bulk of these Italian-made Vox guitars were shipped to Thomas Organ for the U.S. market.

British production of Vox guitars continued simultaneously, and it was common to have the same models built in both factories. British-made Vox guitars have sequential serial numbers stamped on the back of the headstock (and later on the neck plates), while the Italian-made guitars have a different set of serial numbers that is always stamped onto the neck plates.

As Vox grew, Jennings continued to experiment with new guitar models. One of the most famous is the Vox Teardrop, which Jennings said was inspired by a lute. This new Vox model was the third in the Phantom series, and was appropriately named the Vox Phantom Mark III, although, to this day, it is more commonly referred to as the Teardrop. The very first Teardrops had two pickups, and were hand made by Bennett and Wilson at the Dartford factory. According to Kelly, Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones did not receive the first Vox Teardrop guitar built. A pair of Vox Teardrop instruments—a guitar and bass—debuted in January of 1964, and Jones didn't receive his famous white Teardrop until mid 1964. Soon after, he was given a 12-string version. Jones' use of the Teardrop with the Rolling Stones made the guitar one of the most sought after and recognizable of all Vox guitars.

Vox surged forward with almost limitless bounds in guitar design. A slew of unique new models were introduced, and innovative instruments such as the Vox Scorpion, an X shaped



Brian Jones (left) strums a Mando Guitar. Keith Richards (right) with a Vox Teardrop.

9-string guitar (with three pairs of strings and three single strings) soon appeared. The interesting Mando Guitar—a cross between a mandolin and a short-scale 12-string—was launched in late 1965. The most advanced guitar Jennings ever produced was the Vox Phantom Guitar-Organ, which was the brainchild of Vox ace Dick Denney and Vox chief engineer Derek Underdown. The Guitar-Organ was actually a Phantom guitar with miniaturized electronics from the Vox Continental organ. The appropriate organ notes were activated when the strings made contact with the frets. Fusing a guitar with a keyboard was a concept well before its time, and did not surface again until more than a decade later with advent of the guitar synthesizer.

Unusual Vox instruments were not uncommon for Jennings. Brian Jones commissioned Vox to build him an electric Appalachian dulcimer. The instrument was made for him at the Dartford factory by a woodworker named Tony Diamond, and Jones used his Vox Bijou dulcimer on the Stones' hit "Lady Jane." Jones' first Bijou dulcimer was stolen at the beginning of the Stones' U.S. tour in the summer of 1966, and a second was quickly made for him. Another Stone with a Vox instrument was Bill Wyman. Vox introduced the semi-hollow teardrop Bill Wyman Signature Model bass in 1966. Various versions of the Vox Wyman bass were produced in both the U.K. and in Italy.

Vox also built a large number of prototype guitars. A one-off guitar called the Kensington was hand built by Bennett at the Dartford factory for the Beatles. Denney, inspired by the wood scrolls on an old piano, sketched the idea on paper and gave it to Bennett. The creation of the Kensington is a good example of how Vox product ideas and design were very often a team effort. The Vox Kensington prototype was displayed at a British trade show in 1966, then went back to the factory, where it

was fitted with a set of custom electronics. The guitar was then given to the Beatles in 1967. John Lennon used the guitar during the filming of the "Hello Goodbye" video, and, later, George Harrison used the same guitar during the filming of "I Am the Walrus" in an outtake for the *Magical Mystery Tour* film.

Despite the popularity of Vox guitars, Jennings' business dealings were not always the best, as evidenced by his decision to sell a controlling interest in JMI to Royston Industries. Because of bad business decisions, production of Vox guitars stopped in the U.K. by late 1967. Italian guitar production, which was controlled by Thomas Organ, continued until late 1969. By the early '70s, Vox was no longer making guitars, and the remainder of dealer inventories was sold off. As the Vox name was sold many times, various short-lived Vox guitar models would pop up through the years. In 1993, Jack Charles introduced a line of Phantom guitars under the name Phantom Guitar Works that included the Teardrop and the Mando Guitar. The original Vox instruments are still treasured by British Invasion fans and command high prices on the vintage market. —Andy Babiuk

Special thanks to Martin Kelly (voxguitars.info) and Jim Elyea (voxguidebook.com). Andy Babiuk is the author of *Beatles Gear—The Fab Four's Instruments from Stage to Studio*, and has been working on a follow-up book titled *Stones Gear*. He is currently finishing a book for Fred Gretsch on the history of Paul Bigsby. Contact Andy at beatlesgear@att.net.



The Vox Mando Guitar was a cross between a mandolin and short-scale 12-string.



VOX KEYBOARDS & EFFECTS

While Vox amplifiers and guitars grabbed the most attention on stage, JMI's keyboards and effects produced many of the signature sounds we associate with '60s-era rock. Among its best-known products was the Continental organ, which was introduced in 1962. Developed by JMI's transistor expert Les Hill, and chief engineer Derek Underdown, the Continental's hip sounds, futuristic styling, and wood-weighted keys (later Italian-made versions had plastic keys) helped make it a hit with musicians—though its signature vibrato sound didn't make it onto any hit records until 1964, with the Animals' "House of the Rising Sun."

Vox tech wizard Dick Denney developed the Vox Echo—a tape-based machine offered in three- and six-head versions that is still one of the most highly regarded of the vintage tape echo units—as well as the Vox Radio Microphone, one of the first commercially available wireless systems for vocal use. One can only imagine how its circa-'64 technology performed in real-world use, but the Radio Microphone doubtlessly furthered JMI's image as a leader in musical technology.

The Vox Tone Bender fuzz was another of Denney's projects, which he started developing in 1962, after obtaining a Maestro Fuzz-Tone. Vox founder Tom Jennings reportedly hated the sound of the Fuzz-Tone, proclaiming that Vox engineers should work to get rid of distortion, and not waste time creating things to produce it! Denney continued working on his fuzz circuit, however, and says that he gave some prototype units to the Beatles in 1965. The Vox Tone Bender was formally introduced in 1966, and was made in Italy. (To confuse matters, another unit called the Vox Tone Bender Professional MKII was made around the same time by Britain's Sola Sound, and Denney also makes reference to the Tone Bender's circuit being produced outside of JMI by a "rogue who worked for the company.")

One positive aspect of Thomas Organ's involvement with Vox product development was the creation of the most famous of all Vox effects—the Wah Wah. Invented by a Thomas Organ engineer named Brad Plunkett, the Wah Wah resulted somewhat accidentally out of a project intended to find a way of using a potentiometer instead of a costly 3-position switch for the MRB (midrange boost) function on the Super Beate amp—the solid-state replacement for the JMI-made AC100. Plunkett came up with a bandpass-filter circuit (later known as the Tone X function on Thomas Organ's solid-state Vox amps) that produced a particularly cool vocalized effect when its center frequency was swept by a pot. Packaged in the same V838 enclosure used for the volume pedal on a Continental organ, the device was initially called the Clyde McCoy Wah Wah, owing to its similarity to the famous "wah wah" sound perfected by Dixieland trumpeter Clyde McCoy, who also endorsed the pedal. (In case you're wondering, McCoy was also a member of the Kentucky family that had been involved in that storied feud with the Hatfield clan.) Introduced in late 1966, the innovative pedal could hardly have been better timed for adoption by the two biggest guitar stars of the era—Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix— and, later bearing the name CryBaby, the pedal was a huge hit for the Thomas Organ side of Vox. —Art Thompson



The Vox Super Continental organ and Clyde McCoy Wah-Wah pedal.

FEATURE

British Invasion!

and the sound of a Vox amp depended on *not* suppressing those harmonics. With Denney and Underdown in charge of the internal aspects of the new amp (which included a larger 30-watt output transformer, and an upgraded power transformer, along with a GZ34 rectifier tube), and Jennings taking care of the cosmetics, the new AC30/4 (which denoted its four inputs—two for the Normal channel, and two for the Vib-Trem channel) rolled out in 1960. The first AC30s had a single Goodmans Audiom 60 12" speaker or a Celestion G-12, but neither configuration delivered the desired results for guitar, and the amp was refitted with two Celestion G-12s and later, Celestion T.530 speakers. The first AC30s delivered to the Shadows would likely have been equipped with either of these speakers.

With England's "beat boom" in full swing, and the Shadows leading the charge with their 1960 hit, "Apache" (which was probably recorded with an AC15), the AC30 soon became the most sought-after guitar amp in Britain. The AC30 established JMI as the preeminent musical equipment manufacturer in the U.K., and it gave Tom Jennings the runway he needed to launch a vast array of new products that would keep Vox an industry leader for the next several years.

TOP BOOST

The AC30 continued to evolve with the introduction of the AC30/6 in 1960, which added a Brilliant channel to the standard complement of Normal and Vib-Trem channels, increasing the number of inputs to six. This change also involved swapping the original EF86 pentode tube to an ECC83 (12AX7) twin triode. It has been said that the AC30/6 lacked some of the clarity of the original model, and that's ostensibly why Vox responded with its Top Boost "brilliance" modification in 1961. This comprised a plate of bent aluminum gripping an extra 12AX7 tube along with Bass and Treble controls, which was mounted into a square cutout on the back of the amp, and wired into the main circuit. Initially, the Top Boost mod could be

PHOTO: TOP—e ALAN TOWSE / RETNA LTD.



MEET THE BEATLES

The Beatles first used their new fawn-colored AC30 Twin amplifiers on July 27, 1962, at the Tower Ballroom in New Brighton (how the band acquired the AC30s is detailed in the sidebar, “Vox’s Unsung Hero” on p. 96). By spring 1963, JMI was taking out advertisements in music trades papers showing the Beatles performing with their new amps. Noticing that Paul McCartney still wasn’t plugging into a Vox amp, Jennings made sure he was given one of the new T.60 amplifiers, along with a bass cabinet and a chrome stand for trolleying the rig around (something McCartney apparently never used). The T.60s’ early solid-state circuitry proved problematic for McCartney, however, and sometime in the summer of 1963, he gave the amp back to JMI in trade for an AC30 head that had the Top Boost mod. John Lennon and George Harrison also received new AC30s about the same time, and this was the backline the band would use for the remainder of the year.

ordered separately, or be factory installed on the AC30/6. In 1963, the extra circuitry was incorporated into the chassis,

and the Bass and Treble knobs were added to the control panel (the add-on unit was still available, though).

ALL BASSES COVERED



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VOX'S UNSUNG HERO

Though it's well known that Tom Jennings founded JMI, and Dick Denney designed and voiced most of the Vox amplifiers, it was an unassuming man named Reg Clark who made sure that the world heard and saw these special amps. On May 25, 1959, Clark, a 27-year-old former clarinetist with the Grenadier Guards, went to work for Jennings as co-manager of his retail store at 100 Charing Cross Road in London. Jennings' shop was in the middle of a transformation from being an accordion center to becoming the place to go for rock and roll instruments, and Clark was to play an enormous part in the transition. Soon after his arrival, he befriended future Shadows' guitarists Hank Marvin and Bruce Welsh, and bassist Jet Harris, and sold them their first Vox amplifiers—TV front AC15s. Clark continued working with the Shadows as they rose to become the biggest instrumental group in the U.K., selling them Vox amplifiers and various guitars—including Harris' well-recorded Fender Bass Six. Clark helped come up with the idea of the chrome amplifier stand, and later, the Vox swivel stands that were actually inspired by the Shadows. The Shadows were soon a mainstay on British television—either backing Cliff Richard, or on their own—and Clark, whose main strength lay in promotion, made sure that someone was there to slip a fiver (a £5 note) to a stagehand, who would make sure the Vox logo wasn't covered up by tape during the broadcast.

In early 1963, a well-dressed gentleman named Brian Epstein walked into the Jennings shop, and approached Clark with a proposal for the new group he was managing—the Beatles. According to the Epstein, they were going to be big—*really big*—and if they were given free Vox amplifiers, the publicity value would be enormous. Clark wasn't authorized to do something like that, plus, at the time, no group was given anything for free. Handing Clark his card, Epstein departed, saying he would be checking back about the deal. Jennings' reaction about giving away free amplifiers was as expected—"no." Clark agonized over his dilemma, but there was something about Epstein's demeanor that made him believe what he said, even though Clark had never heard of the Beatles. Throwing caution to the wind, Clark made the deal with Epstein, who then promised that as long as he was their manager, the Beatles would use Vox amplifiers. What's more, JMI could use the group to promote Vox products at no charge. In one stroke, Clark had not only created the Artists Program at JMI, but had secured the biggest act of the century—all for the cost of a pair of non-Top Boost AC30 Twins.

Later in the year, Clark moved to Dartford, Kent, home of Vox, to become the sales manager, where he initiated an Artists Loan program. Through Clark's efforts, virtually the entire British Invasion used Vox amplifiers, and a number of them also used Vox guitars and organs.

Clark didn't limit Vox exposure to just single groups, either. Every spring, the annual *New Musical Express* Pollwinner's Concert was a virtual who's who of British rock and pop music, and Clark made sure an enormous backline of Vox amplifiers stood behind all the acts. When he heard the popular TV show *Ready, Steady, Go* was changing from lip-syncing to a live format, he arranged for Vox amplifiers to be permanently placed into the decorative scaffolding that made up the set—making sure that even if a group didn't play through a Vox, it appeared as though they did. Clark also had several pairs of Vox LS.40 P.A. speakers placed at EMI/Abbey Road Studios for monitoring.

Clark was a part of the design team that came up with the Vox Python guitar strap, which had metal "scales" like those of the Guardsman's chin strap he had worn in the army. John Lennon, who always greeted Clark with "Hi Vox," took a fancy to a prototype of the black Python, ensuring its popularity even decades later.

By 1968, things had changed at JMI. Company founder Tom Jennings had been forced out, and JMI's parent company, Royston, was in trouble. Clark stayed, and helped keep Vox afloat for a year or two before going to work for Dallas-Arbiter. When that company later bought what was left of Vox, it was Clark who took on the job of managing his old company. Later, when Dallas-Arbiter decided to sell Vox, Clark was able to orchestrate the sale in a manner that would keep the Vox name alive. Vox had secured its place in rock and roll history, and would survive to this day, in large part due to Reg Clark's work. —*Jim Elyea*

Jim Elyea (voxguidebook.com) is the author of the upcoming book, Vox Amplifiers. The JMI Years, which will be available December 2007.

FEATURE

British Invasion!

Between 1963 and 1965, JMI enjoyed an incredible combination of success and creative freedom, and the Beatles played a huge role in enhancing Vox's fortunes. The Beatles started their 1964 world tour using the new AC50 heads for guitar, and the AC100 for bass (both powered by EL34 tubes), but they soon found that playing to ever-larger crowds of screaming fans at the height of Beatlemania demanded even more amplification. Vox responded by pairing the AC100 with a 4x12 cabinet (equipped with Celestion T.1088 poly grey speakers) that also contained two Goodmans Midax mid-range horns and a crossover network.

WINDS OF CHANGE

By the time the Beatles first landed in America in 1964, the wheels were already in motion for a series of events that would dramatically shape the future of Vox. The first was Jennings' ill-advised decision to sell a controlling interest in his company to a British industrial holding company called the Royston Group. Jennings always suspected the rock craze would eventually end, leaving him with a worthless company. But, at this point, he also desperately needed an influx of capital to increase production at JMI—which Royston was happy to provide. Jennings also subsequently entered into a partnership deal with Thomas Organ of Sepulveda, California, for the distribution of Vox products in the U.S. This probably seemed like a good idea to Jennings—who had previously been a distributor for Thomas Organ in England—but, unfortunately, JMI did not have the production resources to meet the huge and sudden demand for Vox gear throughout the world. After 1964, Thomas Organ would begin to "fix" the shortage problems by introducing its own solid-state Vox amplifiers.

While the conversion of the Vox amplifier line to solid-state was taking place in America, JMI rolled out its new 7120 guitar amplifiers and 4120 bass amps. Developed in England, both were hybrid designs that used a modified version of the solid-state preamp found in the Super Beatle coupled with an output stage that delivered 120 watts via four KT88 tubes. The 7120 and 4120 were

Early Vox advertising.



essentially identical, except that guitar version featured footswitchable fuzz, reverb, and vibrato. Neither model was produced in significant numbers, and the 7120 and 4120 rate among the rarest of the Vox breed.

THE SUPER BEATLE

On their 1966 U.S. tour, the Beatles used the new solid-state Super Beatle rigs, which had been designed by Thomas Organ, and voiced by Dick Denney to give them a proper Vox sound. Despite their three channels and preponderance of controls and tonal options, the Beatles were reportedly not entirely pleased when they encountered the Super Beatles for the first time on August 12th at the Chicago Amphitheater. Initially it was because they'd never lent their name to a product before, and Brian Epstein hadn't clued them in on the deal that involved using their name to market the new rigs. (This likely explains why Thomas Organ dropped the "Super"

part of the name in 1967.) There were also reliability issues with the Super Beatles on the 1966 tour. When the Beatles returned to Abbey Road studios in November 1966 to begin work on the *Sgt. Pepper* album, the amps they chose were the Vox 760 and 430 hybrid models, which used KT88 and EL84 output tubes, respectively. The last amplifiers that Jennings and Denney co-developed for Vox were the solid-state Conqueror, Defiant, and Supreme guitar amps, and the Dynamic, Foundation, and Super Foundation bass amps. Despite their abundance of features, improved reliability (most notably over the poorly regarded Berkeley and Essex models Thomas Organ had launched earlier in the U.S.), players' tastes were changing faster than Vox could keep pace.

HARD TIMES AHEAD

By 1967, the Beatles had stopped touring, rock players were beginning to favor the new Marshall amps—which were the

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FEATURE

British Invasion!

sound of Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix—and Vox was caught off guard with nothing to offer as an alternative. In theory, JMI had the 100-watt amplifiers and 4x12 cabinets to go toe-to-toe with Marshall, but the near-complete changeover to solid-state had set the company on a course that could not be easily changed. Jennings and Denney were fired by Royston in 1967, and the two established a new company called Jennings Electronic Industries at the original Vox headquarters in Dartford, Kent. They went on to create a number of products—including the AC40 amplifier, the Winchester guitar (which used a Phantom neck and a wah casing for the body), and various rotary speakers, lighting equipment, and electronic percussion—before the company went out of business in 1973.

Following Royston's demise in 1969, Vox entered a period of murky ownership,



Jimmy Page
performing with
the Yardbirds,
April 15, 1967,
at Holte Hallen
in Copenhagen,
Denmark.



The Clyde McCoy Wah evolution.

limping on for a time under the banner of Vox Sound Ltd. (after being purchased by Corinthian Securities) with a drastically reduced product line that included the AC30 and some of the solid-state models, a few keyboards, and a new line of Japanese-made instruments (the Les Paul-style VG2, and semi-hollow VG4 bass and VG6 guitar). Corinthian sold Vox to the Birch-Stolec consortium in 1970—leading to the hallowed AC30 suddenly sporting reverb, PC-board construction, and a solid-state rectifier—while the Thomas Organ side of Vox tried to steer into other markets with P.A. gear, spacey looking drum kits, and the innovative Starstream and Ultrasonic guitars with onboard effects.

Thomas Organ stopped marketing Vox products entirely in 1972, which was the same year Vox was sold once again—this time to CBS-Arbiter (Arbiter was Britain's importer of Fender products). The AC30 was returned to handwired assembly—albeit with a particle-board cabinet, and less costly Celestion G12M ceramic-magnet speakers—and Brian May started officially endorsing the new amp. CBS-Arbiter also offered the AC50, as well as some entirely new amplifiers, including the V100, Escort 30, AC30SS (a solid-state version of the AC30), and the AC120—Vox's answer to the Fender Twin Reverb. The Continental 1 and Continental 300 organs were reissued, and more pedals emerged under CBS-Arbiter, as well, including the new Vox Tone-Bender fuzz/wah, the Vox Wah Swell, and the Vox Phaser.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The fundamental problems of having U.S.-based CBS—which owned Fender, and had

never really wanted to have anything to do with Vox—providing the funding for a potential overseas competitor ended in 1978, when CBS-Arbiter sold Vox to the Rose Morris company, then still a distributor for Marshall amplifiers. It was

also the year Tom Jennings died, which is somewhat ironic in that Vox suddenly regained a degree of autonomy under Rose Morris that it hadn't enjoyed since 1963. RM had no manufacturing facilities of its own, so it acquired Arbiter's plant in Shoeburyness (a town in Southeast Essex), where it launched a variety of new amplifiers throughout the 1980s. Starting with the V125 tube head—which was basically a modified AC120—the range soon expanded with the V15 (a 15-watt 2x10 tube combo), the Escort 50 Lead and Bass amps, and the Climax combo with its V125 chassis. Rose Morris still preferred the solid-state route, however, and with development and production help from an outside contractor called Audio Factor, the result was the Venue series of amplifiers (introduced in 1984) that were endorsed by the Smiths and the Style Council. Venue P.A. gear was also introduced, as was a channel-switching Venue model called the Dual 100. RM also launched a number of new Vox set-neck and bolt-on neck guitars and basses in the Standard and Custom ranges—many of which featured laminated body designs that had more to do with high-end Ibanez models than anything Vox had ever made.

In 1985, the AC30 was re-designed in order to lower its production cost (again via the use of PC-board construction), and the gain of the amplifier was reduced due to problems with tube quality and PC board-related hum. In 1990, a limited edition 30th anniversary AC30 was introduced in an attempt to get back to the sound of the early '60s models. Dick Denney endorsed the 1,000 amps that were made, marking the first time in 23 years his name was as-

PHOTO: JORGEN ANGEL / RETNA LTD.



The Animals, July 1975.

sociated with Vox. This was followed by the Vintage AC30, which had two additional preamp tubes for its spring reverb, and was also available in a head/4x12 format. The Limited Edition and Vintage AC30s came standard with Celestion G12 speakers. A “Vox Blue” was available, but Celestion did not make this speaker.

In 1991, Korg Inc.—whose products were distributed in the U.K. by Rose Morris—bought the financially troubled company’s assets and retired the name. Along with the purchase came the distribution of various products, a retail store on Denmark Street in London, Berg Larsen (a mouthpiece manufacturer,) the Vox brand name, and an amplifier manufacturing facility in the North of England, which Korg subsequently closed. Berg Larsen and the retail store were sold, but Korg opted to keep Vox alive by having the AC30 redesigned in 1992 by Steve Grindrod, and put into production in the U.K. The new AC30—which featured the original-spec GZ34 rectifier tube and

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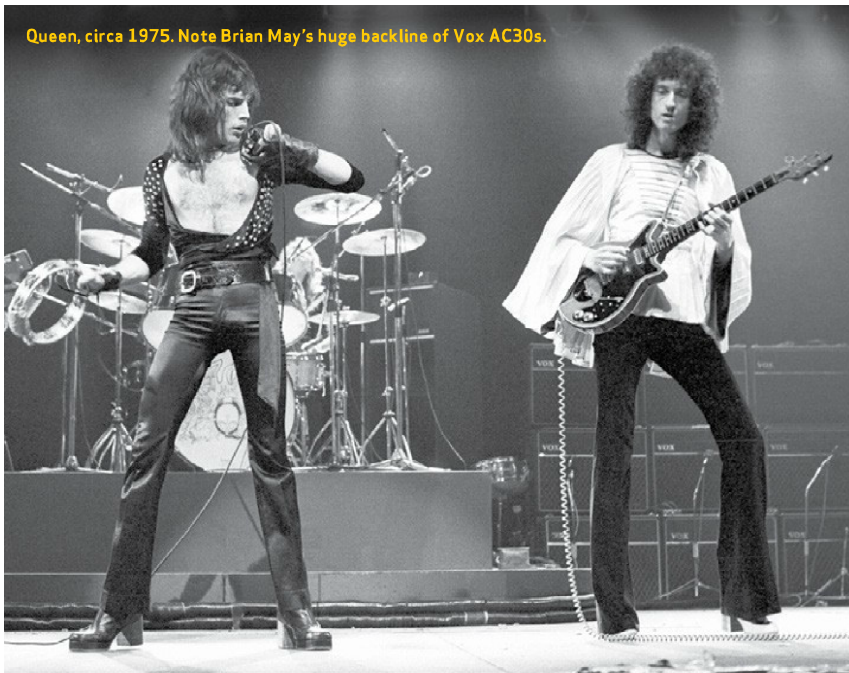
FEATURE

British Invasion!

vintage style Celestion Blue speakers—sold relatively well on a worldwide basis, and a new version of the AC15 (with reverb, and master volume, and tone controls) was introduced in 1996.

Vox would go on to introduce (or re-issue) a variety of new products between 1993 and 2005, including the V847 Wah and germanium-powered Tone Bender fuzz, the Cambridge 30 Reverb and Cambridge 30 Reverb Twin combos, the Valvetronix series modeling amps (which featured the novel invention of using the two triode stages of a 12AX7 like a miniature tube power amp to drive a solid-state output stage), the VBM-1 Brian May amplifier, the Handwired AC30 head and combo, and the Cooltron series stompboxes (which featured battery-powered tube circuitry).

In order to better compete in the global market, while maintaining total control of the quality, design, and sound of Vox tube amplifiers, production was moved to China in 2005. According to company spokespersons, the vertically integrated manufacturing facility Vox is using is capable of many processes not found in most guitar amp factories—including design and manufacture of transformers, cabinets, electronics, and speakers (except for the venerable Vox “Blue” and “NeoDog,” which are manufactured by Celestion). All components contained in the AC30 Custom Classic, the AC50 and AC100 Classic Plus heads and combos, and the new AC15 Heritage Collection models built in this factory have been designed, manufactured, or selected so that the performance and sound meets the specifications re-



Queen, circa 1975. Note Brian May's huge backline of Vox AC30s.

quired by the Vox design facility in Bradwell Abbey, Milton Keynes, England.

In closing, the future looks bright for Vox in its 50th year of nearly continuous operation. It's kind of amazing to consider Vox's first amplifier entered service a full decade before *Guitar Player* went into pub-

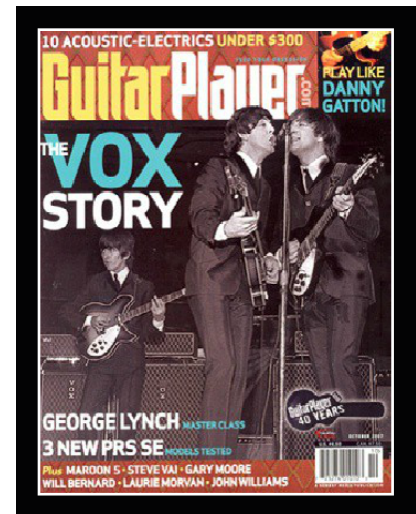
lication (and we pride ourselves on how long we've served the guitar playing community). So, congratulations Vox on your golden anniversary. The sound of rock wouldn't be the same without you! 🎸

Special thanks to Jim Elyea for his technical assistance.

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VOX POP: HOW DARTFORD POWERED THE BRITISH BEAT BOOM.



CLASSIC INTERVIEW

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