



OPENING BARS



DAVE HUNTER

Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of numerous books including *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*

Letters from *America*

TEX AMPS TEXOSOUND BERNIE CUSTOM

You'd be forgiven for thinking this neat little combo is a genuine relic of the golden era, but **DAVE HUNTER** finds out that the Texosound is equally authentic inside...

There are a lot of nifty amps out there on the so-called boutique scene, many of which will easily elicit rapt oohs and ahhs from valve-heads such as yours truly. Some lesser number of these, however, stand out immediately as being something a little more special – somehow inherently akin to the magic and mythos of the more lust-worthy vintage amps. This little Texosound Bernie Custom combo from Tex Amps is one such creation. If I didn't know otherwise, you could easily convince me this was a little-known Vox or Selmer offshoot of the late 50s or early 60s dug out from beneath the bed, raring to roar back to life deep in the second decade of the 21st century. Yeah, it's just that cool.

Tex Amps are the work of Tony Teixeira (you'll also see them listed occasionally as Teixeira Amps), and have nothing whatsoever to do with Texas. Based in Toronto, Canada, Teixeira's amp-building business is an offshoot of the Shyboy & Tex amp and guitar repair and sales operation that has been fuelling satisfied musicians on the local scene for many years, and under which banner he's done tech work for the likes of Daniel Lanois, and Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee from Rush – while notable players such as Colin Cripps (Blue Rodeo, Kathleen Edwards) and Jeff Tweedy (Wilco) have been plying their trade on his Tex amps.

The Bernie model is a descendant of a handful of amps that an elusive Canadian engineer named Bernie Raunig

crafted from the chassis and transformers of Bell & Howell Filmosound projectors several years ago, but in Teixeira's hands (with credit offered to fellow Toronto tech Martin Newall, a transplanted British engineer who helped iron out kinks in the circuit layout), this template has evolved into something very much its own thing. In short, it was translated by Teixeira from a diamond in the rough with rats-nest wiring and largely cheap

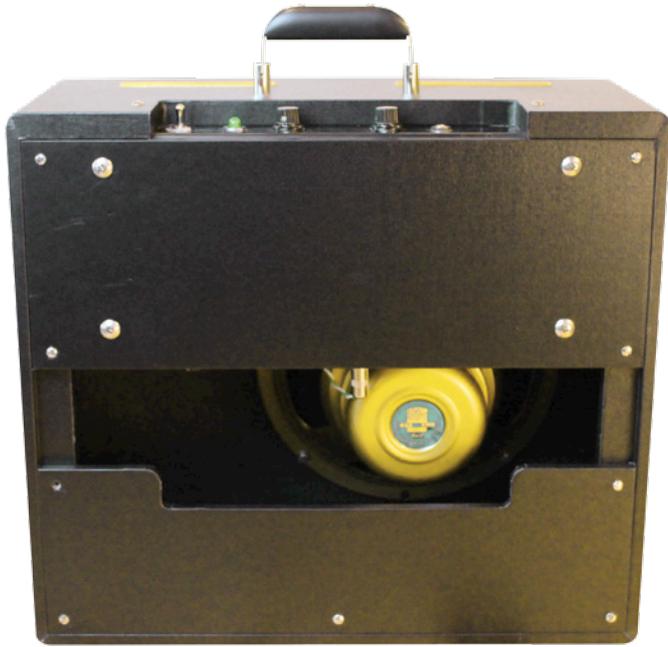
consumer-grade components to a diamond in an intricately crafted setting, done out with the best parts its maker can lay his hands on. This petite 1x10 combo puts out around 20 watts courtesy of a pair of EL84 output tubes, with two ECC83s (aka 12AX7s) in the preamp and phase inverter, and an EZ81 rectifier tube. Add it up, and the blueprint will ring bells with any players familiar with small-to-medium-sized British amps of the late 50s and early



KEY FEATURES

Tex Amps Texosound Bernie Custom

- **PRICE** Approx. £1,695, excluding shipping and duties
- **CONTROLS** Volume, tone
- **OUTPUT** 20w
- **TUBES** 2x 12AX7 preamp tubes, 2x EL84 output tubes, EZ81 rectifier
- **FEATURES** 1x speaker output with switch for 8 and 16 ohms
- **SPEAKER** 10" Celestion Gold (Celestion Vintage 10 standard)
- **WEIGHT** 12.2kgs/27lbs
- **CONTACT** texamps.com



60s, although this wee combo is likely put together more robustly than any of those 'student models' ever were, and is capable of some surprisingly pounding output, too. It's worth noting that the Bernie is also available in a 1x12 combo, as well as a version with an EF86 pentode front end, although Teixeira voices each version differently. The 1x10, for example, gets some circuit tweaking to enhance the low-end punch, priming it to sound big and full through its single 10-inch speaker and compact 18 x 16 x 9 cab, while the 1x12 is dialed in to avoid sounding boomy through its bigger driver.

Classic Combinations

It's a tasty package outside, with a semi-smooth Rexine cloth covering the Baltic birch ply cabinet, an off-white cane-weave grille cloth, gold vents, and a smart black control panel. I dig the nifty hinged luggage handle, too, which echoes those used on some vintage Gibson amps, and also early Matchless combos. It all gets more lustworthy when you dip inside the heavy-gauge aluminium chassis, though, where Teixeira's skill really begins to shine.

Other than the pristine hand wiring on a custom heavy-duty eyelet circuit board, the first thing an amp nut is likely to notice is how Teixeira eschews current makes of capacitors and other parts in favour of more esoteric components. Every amp is a little different, because, as the maker

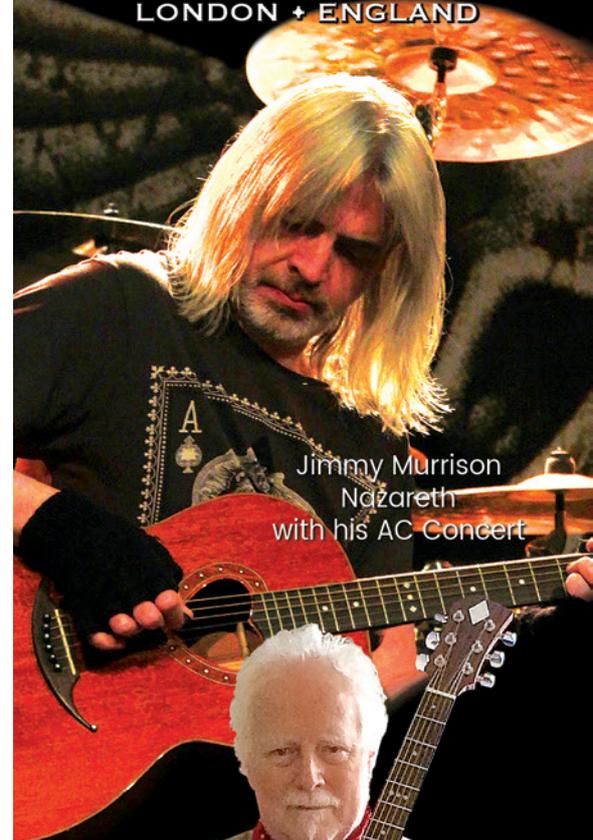
puts it, "I sort of mix it up for a different flavour per amp build." But as far as caps go, he declares, "I only use NOS. I always use some Phillips 'mustard caps', often MKT tropical fish or yellow 70s Siemens types, Sprague Vitamin-Q, Russian military Vitamin-Q types, and I just got the West German ERO caps in that amp you have there."

Indeed, this particular Bernie chassis carries one of the vaunted 'mustard caps' in the unusual value of 0.082µF between the first two gain stages, three 0.022µF ERO caps further down the line, and a pair of white Siemens between the phase inverter and output tubes. The smaller filter capacitors are the Phillips and Siemens types found in loads of British and European amps of the 70s, while the big fellas are from Sprague and JJ. Pots are by Bourns, the rotary output-impedance selector switch is from Grayhill (who make the switches used in F-15 jets), and the knobs are from Dakaware.

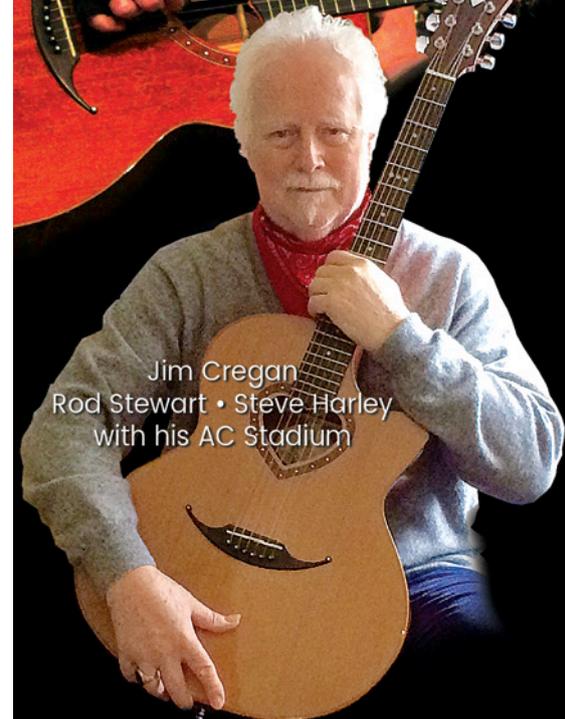
And if it isn't NOS, Teixeira tells us, "Most everything in that amp is custom-made for me. I even had the tooling made for the vents." Among the more significant large components, in addition to a custom-spec'd Heyboer mains transformer, the output transformers Tex uses are custom-wound exclusively for his amps, and are exact replicas of an OT from a Canadian-made Bell & Howell Model 399 Filmosound projector. "The OT is a big part of the sound for both the Bernie and

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my Texosound EF86,” he adds. Tube-wise, the EL84s are a pair of respected NOS Russian military stock from the Reflektor plant, and the ECC83s in this example are from Mullard and RCA.

All this is coupled to a deceptively simple user interface; which is to say, there’s just one volume knob and one tone knob. ‘Deceptive’ because latter taps an extremely interactive and unusual tone circuit that acts somewhat as a combined second gain stage and presence booster as you wind it up, adding brightness and drive simultaneously. Teixeira’s usual speaker of choice for the smaller combo is Celestion’s Vintage 10, although this amp – supplied for our review by Jason Berken, who, in addition to being Bob Dylan’s touring amp tech, is also guitarist with Green Bay, Wisconsin indie band, the Snowbirds – carries its owner’s preference of a 10-inch

Celestion Gold. “Tony’s attention to detail and ability to voice each amplifier like an instrument is what drew me to these amps,” Berken told me upon shipping the amp out this way. “It’s a great big sound in a perfect-sized beautiful box!”

This is the best sounding amp of this size that I’ve played in a long, long time – vintage or boutique

Having played the Bernie for several hours myself, I’m willing to say this is the best sounding amp of this size that I’ve played in a long, long time – vintage or new/boutique. But phrasing it like that is a bit misleading, because this Bernie belts out far more than a ‘small amp’, despite its diminutive dimensions and cute appointments. This is

one loud little combo once you get it rolling, easily up to club standards, and could handle any gig with a mic in front of that raging 10-inch Gold.

With a Les Paul, a Telecaster, and a P-90-loaded Novo Serus J plugged in for testing, to my

ears, this combo exhibits a near-perfect blend of punch, clarity and vigorously stout core with vintage-tinged snarl and compression, all wrapped in one enormously dynamic and enticingly chewy, complexly sonorous whole. Get the volume up to half way, and notes swell and swirl as you hold them, and even though you aren’t getting

screaming lead tones by this point, and there’s no overdrive pedal in the front, it truly sings regardless, even sliding into easy harmonic feedback when you hold a note just right. Ultimately, I’d say it’s just magically euphonic – with a thickness and richness even at lower-volume ‘clean’ settings that is very musical and appealing. And while it drives gorgeously under its own steam when pushed, this thing’s robust voice and admirable headroom also helped to make it a superb pedal platform with an Xotic BB Preamp, a Gas FX Drive Thru, and a JHS Angry Charlie in the front end.

Exhibiting the best of what small-to-medium boutique can achieve, along with the personality of a great vintage amp, the Bernie still retains very much its own flavour. In truth, I’m floored! 🎸