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by Trent Salter

Mark Sampson



MH: Tell us about your early musical influences.

MS: My earliest Musical influence was the Beatles. I was around 10 when they first appeared on the Ed Sullivan show. I immediately wanted to emulate the stage presence that I saw coming through the TV screen. I continued to listen to the pop music while growing up in the sixties. My father always wanted our family to listen to Country and Western Music, so there was always tension about what to listen to when we were a family together, but consequently I was exposed to early good C&W when I was young. In the 80's I was in a couple of local Country and Western bands, it started as a fill in thing, and grew from there. Consequently I began to see C&W as a real music style instead of something to hate. Queen, and Boston were both big influences of mine, later in the 70's.

MH: Being an old Iowa boy yourself, tell us a bit about how you got your start in this business.

MS: During the 80's when I was with one of the country bands, I had sought out old Vox amps, (because I still had the Ed Sullivan show stuck in my head). Being in Iowa there were not many Vox amps around and the only one I found initially was an American made Royal Guardsman. This was a solid state amp and did not sound like I wanted to when it began to break up. So I continued to look for an amp like my 60's favorite bands had. I eventually found a broken AC-30 Head in Chicago on a trip there. I was unable to find any one in town to fix the amp. Since I had 3 years of electronics in high school, and having a father repairing TV's for friends and relatives, I thought I would try to fix it myself. Success at this encouraged me to continue in the trade. One thing led to another, and eventually I was importing amps from England. Generally they all needed some little thing or major thing fixed. I really learned how to repair amps as a necessity to sell them. I concentrated on J.M.I. Vox amps. I did not realize at the time that I had picked one of the most problematic, and temperamental amps I could have picked, in terms of how well they traveled.

MH: Do you recall the first amplifier you modified or built?

MS: The first amp mod I attempted to build was an add on TopBoost for JMI AC-30's. JMI originally made this as a dealer add on item, to convert non-topboost AC-30's to TopBoost types. Upon seeing the first one of these, I immediately saw that there would be a market for this item, so I began to manufacture them as a tool to help sales of Vintage AC-30's.

MH: Recap your playing days and how that influenced you into building amplifiers.

MS: While I was playing, I was also importing amps from the U.K., and doing a lot of buy sell trade. Consequently I got to try out a lot of different guitars, amps, and effects. This left me with a sort of library in my head of how different things sounded and interacted with each other. During this time I was continually searching for THE TONE and I taught myself how to modify my gear and what altering the units in different ways did to the sound.

MH: What and when was the first amp that officially sold under your name?

MS: Matchless was the first amp that I built and sold commercially. I did not want to use my namesake on any commercial enterprise because of a conversation I had with Leo Fender and Dale Hyatt one day at lunch. This was in 1989 I think, John Jorgenson took me to meet with them. Anyway, I digress, Leo and Dale had both cautioned me against using my name on any business venture. Leo felt that he had done a lot of creative work post Fender and didn't like having to compete with his old designs branded under his namesake. This was shortly before we needed to name Matchless, and when I shared this information with Rick Perrotta we both felt that this was good advice.

MH: Tell us about the early days of forming Matchless and your relationship with Rick Perrotta?

MS: Rick Perrotta and I were introduced to each other by Albert Molinaro the owner of Guitars R Us in Hollywood. I believe the store is closed now because Albert has moved on to other interests. At that time he saw that we were both interested in building amps that were at least somewhat in the Vox vein, and felt we were a good match for each other. We were

given each

others phone # and got together in May of 1989 one night and just decided we would build some amps at least initially for friends and ourselves, and if it went nowhere we would be happy we built something we were proud to own. The idea was initially to build the most road worthy amp we could. Rick Perrotta and I had a fascinating relationship with regard to design, there was a synergy created through healthy competition that forged a better product constantly. In the beginning of Matchless, Rick and my skill sets complemented each other extremely well, Rick had business skills, I knew how to build things. This is not to say that Rick didn't know how to build things though. We just had different experiences. This helped with the original launch of the Matchless Company so our energies were more focused.

Mark Sampson

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MH: Obviously your Matchless Amp designs really put [Mark Sampson](#) on the map. Give us an overview of the Matchless legacy from start to finish.

MS: Initially when Matchless was started in 1989 the Idea was to build the most roadworthy amp possible. This morphed somewhere in the prototyping stages into building the best sounding amp we could possibly build, and at the same time make it roadworthy. This had to be accomplished while still making it attractive looking. Matchless got it's big break in January of 1991 when we won the first of the no bull reviews that Guitar Player Magazine did. We had pulled all of the money we could put together and were at the NAMM show when we heard the news, we were really surprised. The company continued to grow and so did the duties and pressures. A now defunct organization called U.S. Music was looking to acquire brand name companies, at the same time we were in need of relief on the business side due to all of the mounting pressures of the quick growth of the company. This was in the fall of 1993. A deal was finally struck in January 1994 merging Matchless with US Music as the parent company. The deal became problematic from the start. Eventually I acquired controlling interest in the company back. Rick Perrotta, and his brother Chris (who had come on board to help with some of the mechanical engineering and day to day management duties) sold their shares back to U.S. Music and we officially parted ways. This was in the fall of 1995. I became president and CEO of Matchless at this time. During our tenure with US Music Rick and I met a lot of experienced people in the field that would eventually become a part of my management team, as US Music was dissolving and they needed to move on. I still maintain relationships with many of them to this day. They all deserve to be listed here but there is simply not the space. I ran Matchless until October 1998 when I signed controlling interest over to my partner at that time. I stayed on until sometime between Christmas and New Years Eve 1998. I was asked to turn in my keys and, I cooperated, to ease the friction and to help nurture the promise that Matchless would be repaired. There were a number of factors that caused the problems leading up to this point.. Most of which could not be foreseen, some could have been, possibly, but hindsight is 20-20 as they say. I will briefly touch on them as this has become great fodder for the rumor mill and needs some correction. In the spring of 1997 our lease had expired. This corresponded with the longest and greatest growth the company had ever seen, on every level. We consequently purchased a building that was approx. 50% larger for anticipated growth. The overhead that was associated with the new building was enormous thus raising additional costs. The building needed remodeling to work with our operation. This was both costly and time consuming. Through the early part of 1997 the management team had been recommending we come out with a line of slightly less expensive amps built on a circuit board, to segue into a better price point and at the same time maintain our current lineup of products. I made the decision to go ahead with the series and it was named the Superliner Series. We had been in development of rack mounted gear during this time also. The costs associated with the development and startup of the Superliner series were enormous and taxed the budget more heavily than expected. The next thing that happened was that we were sending approximately 40% of our production per month to Japan. This had been a very steady source of sales for the company, and been one of the stabilizing factors in the business. The Yen crashed in the fall of 1997 right when sales of products normally pick up for the year. I got a call from our Japanese contact and was informed that they could no longer buy any product at least at any level close to what they had contracted for, and we were free to look for another distributor. I nearly dropped the phone. We attempted to shift the focus to US sales but were not able to make up the difference in time. One more event shaped Matchless' fate; in early 1998 the company had been fighting a long standing wrongful termination lawsuit. We felt the case had no merit. However due to an unusual set of

circumstances, we were the next case up, in the same court, same jury pool, and same setting as Tylo Hunter's High profile wrongful termination case against Warner Bros. Entertainment. She won with much fanfare and media attention. Hunter's case was settled two days before our case was to go to trial. We negotiated an out of court settlement that took the all of the cash that the company had. By late spring, early summer we were having trouble meeting our obligations. The company never recovered.

MH: What did you do after you left Matchless?

MS: After Matchless I did a lot of studio work around town. By that I mean repair, modification, and design of studio gear. I very much enjoy designing studio type products, the thought process is so different from the guitar amp design process. I also did some amp repair jobs to keep my family afloat.

MH: This led into your latest venture with "Bad Cat" Amps. Give us a brief history of how this transpired.

MS: James Heidrich contacted me and said he wanted to do a start up co. that focused on high quality amps. I had turned down a number of offers to do design for other companies and several employment opportunities because they just didn't seem to fit. But James had a lot of the right ideas, and seemed open to suggestions on how a company needed to work in this industry to be successful. We worked out a deal and I started doing design for him.

MH: What is your goal with Bad Cat and what do you feel is unique to this new line of amplifiers?

MS: While I was doing studio work I learned a lot of design tricks, and I started applying some of the ideas I had to guitar amps, to improve the noise level, and acquire better harmonic content and to eliminate power supply harmonics. At the same time I had always wanted James' Company (Bad Cat) to be it's own entity. We decided early on that we would try to establish a different identity for his company in terms of product design, and marketing of that design, while at the same time trying to maintain the high quality and tonal excellence that I have always desired in my designs. With the Hotcat and some of the new unreleased (Unh-Unh I'm not telling) products we feel that we are going to be able to service more of the

market, and at the same time not compromise any of what my designs have been known for in the past. The Two-Tone Footpedal Bad Cat just released features a number of things never seen on pedals of this caliber and style of manufacture in the past. The Goal has always been and will always be to improve upon my previous work and never compromise tone or quality.

MH: Does that Bad Cat line differ greatly from your earlier designs?

MS: I tried to improve on my earlier designs, and at the same time update the features, while improving the noise levels. All of the amps created after the launch of the company were started with a clean sheet of paper. The Wildcat, Cub II R, The Hotcat all have no counterpart relatively to my earlier designs.

MH: You're a firm believer in true "Class A" amplifier design. What do you feel is the greatest advantage to a "Class A" design?

MS: I simply like the tone, and feel of this particular circuit design. Apparently it has hit a chord with guitar players also. (No pun intended)

MH: How many models are produced by the Bad Cat line and briefly describe each.

MS: The model breakdown is as follows:

Cub II & Cub II R

This is a 15 watt dual EL-84 powered amp with interactive tone controls, that can be taken out of the circuit with a switch. This gives the amp a large range of simple to use gain structures with a lot of latitude regarding tone controls. It is available with or without reverb. This amp is available in 1x12 or 2x10 speaker configuration.

Hot Cat

This amp has dual inputs with one being clean with the other being high gain. The high gain channel is higher gain than anything I have ever designed before. The high gain channel has some unique controls that allow you to tailor the attack and tonal characteristics of the distortion. I feel this gives the player more flexibility than anything I have seen on the market before. The power is from a pair of EL-34's. Available in 1x12, 2x10, or head.

Black Cat & Black Cat Reverb

This is a 4 EL-84 powered, dual channel amp. One triode channel, and One pentode channel. Available with or without reverb. I recently developed for Groovetubes an adapter that allows the customer to plug in a 12AX7 where the pentode is. This will allow for a different type of distortion and clean tone. It is a plug in unit, so you can switch back and forth quickly and easily. It's a neat little device. Bad Cat will be offering this as an accessory. These amps were the first ones that Bad Cat produced. This is available in 2x12 or head.

Wild Cat Reverb

This amp is a 2 EL-34 powered version of the Black Cat Reverb. The adapter I listed above will also work on this amp. This is available in a head or 2x12 only.

Two Tone Footpedal

This is an all tube dual channel pre amp/ distortion pedal. It has three modes, Bypass, Clean volume and tone, High gain with interactive bass & treble and master volume. The clean channel will distort, and at the same time the high gain channel will remain clean. There are LED indicators to let you know which mode you are in.

MH: I consider the early Matchless models to have paved the way for several boutique amplifier companies of today. How do you feel about providing such an impact on today's market?

MS: Thank you for the compliment, I just feel fortunate to be able to work in an industry that I really enjoy working in. I just thank God for the ability and common sense to fill what we saw as a hole in the market place.

MH: **Any new products in the R&D department at Bad Cat at this time?**

MS: That is not something I can talk about. Sorry, you'll just have to wait and see.

MH: **What's your opinion on the future development of the boutique amp market?**

MS: I think that there will always be an opportunity for Boutique amp makers. The market is constantly in a state of flux, constantly moving, and the most clever manufacturers will adapt and change accordingly.

MH: **In closing Mark. What do you attribute your success to and what advice would you pass along to consumers looking to purchase a boutique amp?**

MS: This is really 2 questions, but the answer to the first part is; I have been blessed by God with a unique set of ability's (Just as everyone in the world has, but I digress) I found and used mine. I try to never waste a day, do my best always, and never ever be content with anything being good enough. Remember, there is no screw up so big, mistake so bad, or wrong turn taken that cannot be corrected with time, humility, honesty, and action. To the second part of the question; If your playing has matured to the point that you are unhappy with your current rig, then do as follows. Take your guitar to try an amp out. Then take any effects you use with you, and try it out with them. If you play with a band try it out with the band, and don't leave out the bass player, as there are a lot of phasic type relationships that happen within a live band situation. Finally, if you record put a 57 in front of the amp, and lay a track, if the amp is not recordable with this time proven simple method, it probably will be a one trick pony that only occasionally gets used. In short make sure the amp works for you.

MH: **Any closing advice or words of wisdom you have learned from your career in the business?**

MS: If you don't know what to say, just stand there and BE COOL.



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