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## The Tone Quest Report Ceser Diaz Interview August / 2000

Our dear friend César Diaz passed away on April 26, 2002. Goodbye, César... You will be missed, but never forgotten.

*Let's start at the beginning, Cesar. You came to the U.S. as a 17 year- old guitar player and what happened?*

I came to the States from Puerto Rico in 1969 with \$20 in my pocket after finishing a tour with Johnny Nash (*I Can See Clearly Now*). Mick Taylor was making \$250 a week playing with *The Rolling Stones* in 1972, so you can imagine how much I was making with some guy from Barbados (laughs). You just didn't make that much money back then, so yeah, I had about 20 bucks. I had taken electronics courses in a vocational school in Puerto Rico for 3 years when I was very young, and when I came to the States I went to night school, and that's where I got most of my early knowledge. I never got my masters degree in electronics like I wanted to, but I think I qualify as an electronics engineer.

*Did you continue to play guitar professionally while attending night school? How were you supporting yourself?*

Yes, I played and I also worked from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. at a textile mill here in The Poconos. The factory has been torn down since, but it was a real Steven King kind of place. It had been built over a century ago and it was a real funky old factory. I don't know if you've ever been to a textile mill, but back then there was all of this stuff floating in the air from the yarn and the dyes...

*Not exactly a day spa?*

Not at all. I worked there for 2 years before I decided to retire from that job and start Diaz Amplification, and I've been doing this since I was 21.

*What were you doing with amps initially?*

I started very small, and at one point I went to Ann Arbor, MI and met people like Bob Seger and Luther Allison. I picked up any jobs I could do – amp work, playing, whatever. I stayed in Ann Arbor for a couple of years before moving to New Haven, CT. I took GE Smith with me to play in a band called *Hombre*. We were doing top 40 and a few originals, and I eventually quit the band partly because I didn't want to play *Grand Funk Railroad*. After that I stayed pretty low-key, did a lot of writing, and played in a band that was close to being signed with A&M. When that deal fell through, I moved to Washington, D.C., and that's where I met Stevie Ray Vaughan.

*And all of this time you were working on amps?*

Always. I got real good at finding and restoring Fender tweed amps and I got into the vintage guitar business really early on. At that time we were very fragmented, but everybody knew each other. Charlie Wirz and I were

good pals, Dave Crocker, Larry Briggs – some of the guys that put the very first Dallas Guitar Show together. It wasn't like it is now where *anyone* can be a guitar dealer. I also did vintage pickup rewinding for Seymour (Duncan) for awhile. When people would send old pickups to him to be fixed he'd send them to me.

*I spoke to someone recently who sent a dead vintage Strat pickup to you years ago to be rewound and you reportedly told him, "No, you don't want to rewind it – send it to me and I'll fix it." And you did, but it hadn't been rewound.*

Right, I found the break. If you take a few turns off the coil it won't change the sound of the pickup too much, and a lot of those problems are just plain old cold solder joints. If you have to get into it deeper, then you do have to rewind it, but like a good surgeon, I try to do some exploratory surgery first. I was one of the first guys that used heavy formvar wire and plain enamel for pickup repairs. It just wasn't done back then. I also started the term "mother of toilet seat" for those old pickguards. They really do look like toilet seats from the 50's and I'm 49, so I'm definitely old enough to remember that. I started in this thing before you could even give away maple neck Strats – you had to beg people to take them. Then Layla came out and all of that quickly changed...

*So you moved to D.C. and how did you hook up with Stevie Ray?*

A friend of mine named Steve Jacobs took me to see Stevie, and looking back on it, he really changed my life when he invited me to hear Stevie play, so I want to give him credit for that. Steve Jacobs is a guitar player who's really well known in Blues circles. Backing up a bit, I had met Peter Green in 1969 when I helped him set up his equipment at the Fillmore East, and I learned about that out-of-phase sound Peter got by turning the neck pickup around so that the pole pieces are facing the bridge rather than the neck. To really get that sound, you have to actually turn the magnet around, but once you take the magnet out of a humbucking pickup, you need to re-magnetize it. However, if you happen to have a magnetizer, you can change the polarities in a pickup without having to remove it. Another way of doing this is to turn the leads inside the pickup around.

*Do you still work on pickups?*

I don't push it, but yes, I do, you just won't see my name out there with Lindy Fralin and Joe Barden, because there's only one of me doing it, along with everything else.

*Back to Stevie...*

My friend Steve Jacobs told me, "Man, you have to see this guy play – he's really got the Blues," and I said, "No white man has ever had the Blues. You don't know what it's like to be called a nigger." I'm pretty brown myself, and I've been called a few names in my life. I'm the only guy I know that has changed race 8 times in a decade. Now, I'm like, Latino, which is really hip today... So I went to see Stevie and he was great, man, but he had the worst tone in the world.

*What amps was he using?*

He was using the VibroVerbs, but they needed servicing, and the guitar needed to be set up. He wasn't fully on top of his form yet.

*When and where was this?*

1979 I believe, at a place called the **Psychedeli**

*And he was using 2 Vibroverbs...*

Exactly, both with JBL's. I walked up to him and said, "Man, you're a great player but your tone sounds like shit." I've never been one to say no to a fight – I have a few scars – I've been around, but I've never run away from anybody, so I was prepared for this Texan guy to get cocky with me, but he was just the opposite – just a really nice guy. So, when I told him he sounded like shit, he said, "Really?" and I said, "Yeah, and I can help you." He said, "Well what can you do for me?" I explained to him that we could match transformers, match tubes, and change the filter caps, and make those amps sound brand new with genuine vintage parts. At that time I had all of the original parts and back then they were only 10 years old, you know? I truly believe that a lot of this "new old stock" is nothing but a bluff. It's only my opinion, but from experience I think all of that stuff has a shelf life – tubes, for example. It doesn't do a tube any good to be sitting around for 30-40 years. And tube matching – all of those Fender amps were unbalanced, and they're push/pulls to begin with, so sure, it would help to have matched tubes, but it wasn't super necessary. That's not something they did at the factory, sitting there matching tubes and resistors, testing each part. They'd just put them on and every once in awhile one was magical and the next one would be suck-ass. That's mainly why I never played a Stratocaster, because out of all the guitars that Fender made, those were the most inconsistent – you could find 1 that sounded great and 20 that sounded horrible.

*Why?*

Because of the way they were set up, and because of the pickups. They didn't say, "Let's put the weakest one in the neck position, the next weakest one in the middle, and the strongest pickup on the bridge." They didn't realize things like that until much later on. A few years ago, I visited the Custom Shop and I met Abigail Ybarra, the lady who had been winding the Strat pickups in the 60's. I had done a lot of rewinding and testing of the Stratocaster pickups from that era, because my whole thing was, "How did Jimi Hendrix get his tone?" That's how I got anywhere – helping people get that tone, and it was definitely Stevie Ray's thing, getting Jimi's tone. Anyway, spending all of that time examining and testing those pickups when I was young and had the time, I realized that all of the pickups from that era were about 200 turns off, and the resistance was much lower. And I began to put this together – why was Hendrix only using the post CBS guitars with the big headstocks? You'll see very few pictures of him playing a pre CBS Strat, even though Jimi had access to any guitar that was ever made – Les Paul Standards, all of the Strats, Broadcasters – all of that stuff was around to be given to him for free. Why did he choose to only use Stratocasters from that period? To begin with, the bigger headstock gives you more sustain, because the more meat you have on the neck, the more sustain you're going to get. But also, the least amount of gain you have coming out of the pickups, the better it's going to sound when you run through a fuzzbox or any kind of gain device. Obviously, Jimi wasn't a very scientific guy – he just did it because it sounded good, but in any case, that's what he chose to do for a specific reason. When I was at the Fender Custom Shop, I asked Abigail Ybarra if the winding machine was off in the counter. Her eyes got huge and she said, "How do you know that?" I said, "Well, I've taken a lot of pickups apart and I know that you wound them by turns, and I've seen published figures that so many turns equalled so much resistance." Personally, I've never gone strictly by the number of turns, I've always checked the resistance. No matter what my counter would say, I'd always test the resistance when it looked like the coil was getting fat at certain points. I'd set it up so that the neck pickup would be about 5.5K or 5.75K, and go only up to 6.0K ohms – any more than that and you're just going to get mud. I know that because I've had hundreds of pickups go through my hands.

*So to sum it up, the Strat pickups of the mid to late 60's were of lower resistance – weaker – and because of that they sounded better when combined with certain gain-boosting effects...*

Yeah, it made them clearer and more appropriate for being used with a lot of different effects. Lenny Kravitz

was the opening act for a lot of the Dylan dates when I was on the tour, and I really took him under my wing. I was the only one that didn't call him...you know, the word. In the Dylan camp, everyone is very prejudiced –it's very tough to be around those people. Anyway, I sent messages to both Lenny Kravitz and Eric Johnson that part of the secret to getting great tone was using weaker pickups and coil cables. The coil cables add a lot of capacitance and inductance to your signal chain, therefore, when you're playing through a Marshall, you're cutting back on the high frequencies. When we were doing the In Step album with Stevie, I had an endorsement with Monster Cables. They would send me all of this free stuff and I was very excited because I could manage these things for a guy like Stevie, who really didn't even know how to wash dishes. All he knew how to do was play the guitar, but God bless him for that, because he really did something with what he knew. Anyway, I took these cables we got to Stevie and he said, "I hate these things." I asked him, "Why, man, they're the best cables in the world?" He said, "They pass too much electricity." Those were his exact words, and I'll never forget it as long as I live. "They pass too much electricity."

*They were too efficient...*

Yeah, so he sent me out to the local Radio Shack and told me to buy every gray coil cord they had – not the black ones, only the gray ones. And I thought, "Hhmm, this freakin' hick from Dallas is telling me this?" I got them and ran them through my capacitance meter and found out that they added like almost .05 mfd to the signal chain. That made it sound solid – it was like having a tone control, and the brightness and harshness that the Marshalls had was eliminated. There isn't a single picture of Hendrix...back then they already had high-end cables, but there isn't a single picture of Hendrix where you see him playing with a straight cable. Why? This is something I brought up to Eric Johnson – whether he heard me or not I don't know, but it could be the second coming of coil cables.

*You seem to have paid a lot of close attention to Jimi Hendrix...*

Well, yeah, that's how I made money – how I got the job with Stevie. I've been playing since I was 6 years old, through the 50's and 60's, and when Cream and Hendrix came out I had already been playing for quite a few years and it was very easy for me to figure this out. When my amp couldn't do it, I started going to electronics school to do it for myself. I never dreamed that I could actually make money at it. Later, when disco hit and you couldn't get a live gig, if a guy paid me \$35 to fix his amp and I could do 2 or 3 amps a day, that was like playing 2 or 3 gigs. I mean, I lost my hair in the 70's and I wasn't a very marketable person – I certainly wasn't a pretty boy or anything, and being bald wasn't hip. Nowadays, you can shave your head and pop in an earring and it's cool...anything goes. And if you can't play...you can definitely make it today (laughs).

*Back to Stevie...*

The day after we met, I went over to this place in Georgetown where he was playing and worked on his amps. I remember that he asked me what I was drinking, and I have this memory of him walking off to the bar to get me a Heineken, like my waiter or something (laughs). This was in the beginning when they were living in a van and Stevie might have had \$1.50 in his pocket.

*Was Stevie running his 2 Vibroverbs jumpered?*

Yeah...I look at that and I just laugh. You should always use a "Y" cable or a splitter box because you get too much frequency cancellation jump amps and channels, otherwise. I didn't charge Stevie anything at the time, but that's how you get somewhere in this business – you spot a player and nurture him, help him...Oh, and I would like to clarify something about Stevie's left-handed whammy bar. That came from me, and it was a 50's block that almost looks like an octagon – it has a different kind of artful milling pattern to it, and I had that assembly lying around for the longest time. I told Stevie, "If you watched Jimi, his guitar was upside down, so the whammy bar is up here and you can hit it with your elbow. I gave it to him and I never thought he was going to put it on Number One, but the next time he comes around, he's got it on his guitar. But he did it himself, and I think he must have used a knife or a chisel or something. That's why there was a sticker that

said "Custom" below the bridge – to cover the hack job that he did. I said, "Jesus Christ, Stevie, what the fuck did you do?" I saw that guitar when it was pretty clean, with most of its finish in the beginning, but after a couple of years with Stevie, it was just like, done. It was a '62 neck with a question mark body – I never saw a date on it. One time a pickup blew up and we changed it for another blackbottom. Blackbottoms were used up until '64, when they started appearing with a yellow date on them. The magnetic field changed in '58-'59, and if you take a later pickup and change the polarity, they'll sound like the earlier pickups. The polarity changed from the Broadcasters to the Telecasters too.

*When were you traveling with Stevie?*

Only during the last 2 years. Most of the amps would be left with me here, or shipped to me.

*Let's talk about what you did to his amps specifically, and did you advise Stevie regarding speakers?*

I was building amps at that point already and taking little Princeton Reverbs and converting them into CD 100's, which is the top of the line amp that I make now. 100W inside a little Princeton-size amp is basically how Randall Smith at Mesa Boogie got started, but that's something I didn't know at that point, I was just doing it naturally. I started dealing with ElectroVoice because I knew the sales manager, and I'd always been a good sales promoter. I got sick of dealing with the JBL's because they used to blow so easily, and it just wasn't funny anymore. I got sick of changing them out, and I never really liked the harshness of them. However, the first album, Texas Flood, was all VibroVerbs and JBL's. By the way, the thing you wrote in Rene's interview about Stevie never getting the last Dumble we bought is absolutely true.

*Back to amps...if you polled most of the amp bulletin boards for a "best amp" survey, Super Reverbs would come out on top. Stevie used them for a long time, didn't he?*

Stevie used to have Super Reverbs, but they somehow never sounded quite right to him – too much power, you know? He also used to be real superstitious about the number 6. He'd always set the controls on his amps on 6 – the treble on 6, the bass on 6, and I'd back off the knobs with a screwdriver so that when it said 6 it was really on 10 (laughs). You have to do these things.

*Could Stevie really tell when his tubes were getting old by their sound?*

He used to tell me that the tubes were getting tired and the transformers were getting soft. That's just what I had to put up with.

*Did you modify his amps?*

Yes, quite a lot. I'd change the 68K input resistor to 100K so that we wouldn't have so much input signal going into the tubes. The coupling capacitors would be changed to adjust the tone. I'd use a .047 or a .1 in place of a .042 cap. That's where the tone is—in the preamp. At that time tubes were plentiful, and I used to love the Sylvania STR387 6L6's and later on, Sylvania 415's—they were a little bit taller than the 387's. I preferred good old GE 12 AX7's, and sometimes we'd use various JAN tubes, but I preferred the Sylvania 6L6's and GE pre amp tubes over anything else. We never used tube rectifiers. We always replaced them, and I don't recall a single amp that he used that we left with a tube rectifier. What happens with tube rectifier is, not only does it

get hot, but it's right there in front of the power transformer, and it's really susceptible to power supply spikes. When that happens, the tube will see it immediately. It's a common complaint—"I turn on my amp and it sounds fine but by the end of the set it's sounding really distorted." That's the rectifier, because they are just really inconsistent. We also changed the output transformers on the Super Reverbs to those from a Twin Reverb, and on Vibroverbs we used output transformers from a Bassman. I'm not such a stickler on matching impedance because Fenders are very tolerant amps. You can just about feed them anything.

*Confirm why you were changing the output transformers?*

To get the headroom that we needed. We had the same power, but the sound was much more pleasing to the ear, and they were less susceptible to blowing with the larger transformers. Stevie was pretty tough on amps, and you can imagine what would happen to those little output transformers when he'd pop those big strings so hard. It would send a hell of a spike through them. You have to realize that a Vibroverb is nothing but a Pro Reverb or a Vibrolux in most respects, so what do you expect out of a little amp like that anyway?

*What about the Marshalls?*

We always had a couple of Marshall heads around but they weren't really the main thing—they were just around for those times when we needed a little more power.

*More power live, or in the studio?*

He liked to build a wall of sound in the studio, and I made these splitter boxes that were completely passive. They were made out of aluminum with 8 inputs, and how they didn't pick up any hum, I don't know, but it worked. On In Step, we used 32 amps – anything imaginable, from Gibson Skylarks to a Marshall Major Super PA. Those cabinets had 4x15's in them and we called them refrigerator cabinets. I spoke with Mitch Colby at Marshall and he said that was impossible because they only made a few of those. But I'll tell you one thing—people used to give Stevie free shit all the time. It would just appear at our doorstep – VibroVerbs, any kind of amp that someone thought he could use—for free. Where he got those refrigerator cabs I don't know, but one was straight and the other had an angled top and there were 4 Celestion 15's in them.

*Cesar, was there anything you did with Stevie's amps that our readers or their techs might like to try?*

We never used any cascading channels or anything like that. Basically, things were kept normal. We'd bias the amps according to whether they were heating up, and also to Stevie's ear. We tended to overbias rather than underbias. Of course, the tubes didn't last too long, but we always had whatever we needed on hand. Stevie would just play through them, and we'd bias them according to the sound he wanted.

*Tommy Shannon mentioned that you were constantly pulling amps out of sessions because Stevie was blowing them up.*

The most amazing thing that happened to me during that entire In Step session...let see...it wasn't "Riviera Paradise"...by the way, that cut on the record wasn't the best one ever recorded. The best one ever recorded was lost because the tape ran out, and I had to be the one to tell Stevie, because Steve Gaines, the producer, didn't have the balls to tell him. We told Steve Gaines that sometimes he would do it over 4 minutes and he

said, "No, no, that song is only 3 something—I know it." We said, "You better change that reel now, because he might go longer." Stevie played that thing like nobody ever heard and when he came out he said, "Man that was the best, wasn't it?" I said, "I hate to tell you this, but we ran out of tape." By the way, that was the only time Stevie ever used a Telecaster that I know of—it was Paul Burlison's Esquire that he had put a rhythm pickup on. Anyway, we were doing this song like "The House Is Rocking" or something—this was at Kiva Studios in Memphis, and they had 6 rooms and we filled them with 32 amps. Stevie is playing and he stops and says, "The little Gibson upstairs is making noise." Now, he's got cans on and I'm thinking, "How the hell is he comin' with this?" I go upstairs, walk into one room, nothing, then the next, still nothing, and in the last room, there's the Gibson, and sure enough, it's crackling up. Now, remember...Stevie is hearing all 32 amplifiers at one time. All I can say is that the Lord works in mysterious ways, and when you're getting close to your death, you must become sanctified or something. I don't know. I just had to swallow my pride and say, "Well, Stevie, you can hear pretty good."

*Running 32 amps all day and night was no cinch, was it?*

I was at the studio way before anyone else got there every day, and way past when they left. I'd take a little break after the session, grab a couple of picks, and go down to the Rum Boogie on Beale Street and trade them for shots of Jagermeister—liquid Valium, as we used to call it. I've been offered \$500 for each one of my picks today, so I guess those were the most expensive shots I've ever had. Seriously, I really didn't go down there that often (laughing). That session was also really tough, because it was the first time we used ElectroVoice speakers, and none of the original baffleboards on the amps could hold them, so we had to make all new baffleboards. Rene' Martinez and I were involved in that, cutting new ones, mounting speakers, and remounting the grill cloths. I also had to check the bias on all of the amps every night from gig-to-gig, because I had to be sure they all sounded consistent. I didn't want to hear from Stevie. I remember one time an amplifier blew up when I was on tour with him...not even Dylan had the courage to say something like this to me. Stevie said, "I know everybody needs a day off, but from now on, if my amplifier ever breaks down, I expect you to have it fixed by the next gig." That was not really common, and people who truly know me well will tell you that I don't put up with any shit from anyone. I've never been an ass kisser, and most of these guys that I've worked for don't want to have their asses kissed—they want to be told immediately. They just want to be treated like a regular guy, and if they're wrong, they want to be told that they're wrong.

*What else were you doing with the amps?*

In the Marshalls, we always used 6L6's instead of EL 34's, with the exception of the Majors. For those, we used KT88's. The EL34's didn't have that clean top end and really round sound that we wanted, and they were too brittle sounding. Sometimes it also depended on what song we were doing and what tube I thought would be appropriate for that sound. Remember, we weren't after the British sound—we were after the Hendrix sound. I was also the one to introduce Stevie to the Fuzzface. He didn't know what one was until In Step. He had a Univibe, but he never used it, and I brought in a Tycobrae Octavia and the Fuzzfaces. I had 2 of the original ones marked NKT, which stands for New Market. They would tend to sound really good when they were nice and cool, but when they got hot, they'd go down. The fix for any old Fuzzface that has germaniums is to put it in the freezer. Take it out, play your song and replace it with another one that's cold. It has to be germanium though, because silicon doesn't react the same way.

*We're talking about the Arbiter Fuzzfaces now, right?*

Yes, but the early ones we used were Dallas-England. Some of the later Fuzzfaces stamped Dallas –Arbiter had germanium transistors, and some were silicon. It was because the Fuzzfaces with germanium transistors would lose gain when they got hot that I came up with my own modification that went into Stevie's. I used an American transistor that wasn't as susceptible to heat, and the gain was pretty much equivalent, yet very, very consistent. We had about 10 of those because when we were in England, I bought a bunch of empty shells and installed my own modules in them. That's how we came up with my Texas Squareface that we sell now. Like somebody wrote in a song, "There's so much shit in Texas, that I'm bound to step in some." Everything there is bigger, so for guitar players, The Squarface had to come from Texas—God forbid it should come from Pennsylvania, you know (laughs). When people talk about Stevie and how he got that good ol' "Texas Tone," I start laughing, because it came from Pennsylvania to begin with, and I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, and that was my guitar tone—it wasn't Stevie's tone. It came from me first, and I just handed it over to him and said, "Look, here's the way you can sound." I'm a completely different guitar player, and I didn't make any records except for a few bootlegs...but I did play with Dylan. The thing with Dylan is that he never used a road band to record, and I can understand why, because he didn't want the record to just be reproduced—he wants something different every night. Another thing is that a lot of studio musicians are not as good on the road, and vice versa. It's two different things. Being on the road is more like being a pirate, and being in the studio is more like being a...yuppie. I mean, not being able to shower for a couple of days when you're out there is a hard thing to take for a lot of people. You have to forget about what you have at home, because on the road,

you don't have anything. That's why we used to take all of those speakers, transformers, and tubes out with us. Where am I going to find any of that shit out in the middle of nowhere?

*What else can you recall about the effects you were using?*

We would change stompboxes from song to song, swapping one out for a fresh one. Stevie would just signal us and we'd change them. And in between songs or during a song, I would put one of the amps on standby and change tubes behind the stacks. If the filaments were overheating, I'd just flip the amp on standby and change tubes. We used to do that all of the time. I clocked the decibel level at 120dB, and I was back there without earplugs.

*After working with Stevie, what did you do?*

Stevie offered me a full time position, and I told him, "Look, I would love to leave Dylan because I really don't care for it over there, and working with you would be very, very rewarding. But how would you like it if I went with you, and Dylan was always trying to steal me from you with offers of more money?" Stevie thought about it and said, "Yeah, that wouldn't be cool, but if you ever want a home, there's one here for you." So I left, and 3 weeks later Stevie died. I stayed with Bob, and eventually GE Smith was leaving, and everybody in the world was brought in for an audition, but no one had passed. So I slipped a note to Bob that said, "Look, I've been here all of these years, I know all of the arrangements, so why don't you give me a chance?" Much to my surprise, GE Smith came over that night and said, "You're on." I said, "What?" Incredible. Well, I always tried to dress like the band as much as possible, but I didn't have any of those really cool outfits. Fortunately, Dylan and I were the same size, so I just went over to wardrobe and put something on. I went out there and blew them away I guess, because I got the position with the band. We toured a lot, did the Grammys, Mexico, which I hadn't visited in many, many years, and when we finally came off the road I'd had it. Being in the crew was a lot easier—you would get free guitars, free strings, presents that Bob would get and didn't like—he'd say, "Go on, take it home." Being in the band was like...different arrangements every night, the guys in the band didn't want to rehearse, they'd argue about who was going to be the bandleader. Then I find out that the bass player is going to be the bandleader, when I always watched the cowboy movies thinking that the bandleader is supposed to ride in on a white horse playing a Martin. I mean, how could the bandleader be a fuckin' bass player? But I stayed with Bob, still doing stuff with Eric Clapton and The Stones—especially Keith and Woody.

*Would you like to talk about Keith and Ron Wood for a bit?*

Yeah—I worked on all of their amps for many years, fixing them up, going back to 1984. I worked on both of Keith's solo albums, Talk Is Cheap and Main Offender.

*There is some great playing and very cool tones on Main Offender – really raw, powerful guitar work – some of his best in the sense that he's right out front in the mix throughout.*

I adore the guy. He's like the nicest, most beautiful guy I have ever worked for. Between Stevie and him, I can die in peace. There are no 2 guys like that anywhere. Even as congenial as Clapton can be, Keith is the most hanging guy that I've ever met. He'll never spend any time with the guys in the band—he's always with the crew. Tell him that's a really cool shirt he's wearing, and he starts unbuttoning it. Say, "Nice watch," and he starts to take it off. Car? He'll hand you the keys. He's an absolutely great guy—really agreeable, open to whatever suggestions you may have. Woody—same thing. It's a lot of fun being with those guys.

*What are their favorite amps?*

Keith likes tweed high-power Twins and tweed Bassmans. For Woody, 4x10 Bassmans, Deluxes, tweed Deluxes and Pros. He likes anything with treble, bass and presence—the Super—3x10 Bandmasters. Most of the leads on the Stones albums have been recorded with tweed Champs—lots and lots of Champs. It's funny too, because you'll hear the playback and think, "God that's the most horrible thing I've ever heard." Then Keith will go in and say, "Take a little piece of this, some of that and part of this track over here," and the next thing you know, it sounds just like the friggin' Rolling Stones. I mean, that is alchemy—magic.

*Did you do anything special to their amps?*

Just put in the correct, stock parts. On the tweed Twins, I like to use Celestion Vintage 30's and on anything with 4x10's I like the ceramic magnet CTS speakers that Fender used on the Super Reverbs in the late 60's and early 70's. Those things sound unbelievable. I like Jensens, but you just look at them and they blow up. Then, unless you find a really good reconer and you know exactly what paper for the cone you need to use, you're not going to get it right.

*So you would just hunt down old CTS ceramic speakers as needed?*

Yeah, well, in '84 they were still around. Things have dried up since then, and people have unloaded them because they think none of that stuff will mean anything to the next generation of players. I go by my 14 year old. I'll ask him, "Do you know what this is?" and he'll say, "Yeah, that's an SG and so-and so uses one." The names he mentions to me are all new people, and I realize that these new guys are using a new reissue, not the old hip one, and up to a point, when people of our age go, this old gear isn't going to mean much to anyone. I still have a '57 triple pickup Les Paul, a '57 Goldtop, and a '54 Strat, but I bought these things when they were maybe \$500 way back when. Sooner or later, you sell the expensive stuff. I remember having a Firebird VII that I paid \$7,000 for that is long gone, White Falcons...you know, things that you couldn't fight your way out of a bar with, you get rid of that stuff. Now I'm down to a '59 Dotneck 335, a Custom Made, black inlay 335, a '54 Strat, '51 Telecaster, and J. Black was gracious enough to give me a relic Mary Kay Strat #20 and a relic Tele #22. I've kept those, because you don't give away presents. When it comes to tweed amps, I've kept my original Pro, a 4x10 Bassman, but I've come to realize that if I want an amp, I can build it, and by tonight I'll have one. So to me, I'm looking at it from a different stance, I have over 2,500 transformers here, and I just found a box that is full of faceplates for Fender silverface amps—about every single model. After Stevie died, I found a box with a bunch of his effects, 2 Leslies, you know, stuff that's been lying around here for 15-20 years. There are still boxes here and I don't know what's in them. I would love for someone who's getting into the business to just give me a price and take it all. I'm only interested in making new stuff now—not looking back. I do realize that even those tweed amps, as good as they sound, you can build a new one from scratch and they can sound equally as good. Of course, there is also a little bit of magic involved.

*What did you do for Eric Clapton?*

I took his low-power tweed Twin—the one with the 2 rectifiers, and I changed the transformer to a Fender export transformer. In fact, I have the original transformer, because he didn't want it. It's the same power transformer that went into the Showman for the first 2 years. I also took the 2 rectifiers out and replaced them with a silicon diode and installed 2 more 6L6's, just like you'd see in a later Twin. For speakers, we used the Jensen Gold Label 12's—I don't know what he's using today. I was just in the studio with him 2 weeks ago, but I didn't have a chance to look in the back of his amplifiers.

*What were you doing?*

Just sitting around, waiting for something to break down. Nothing did, so I hung out, got paid, and went back

home. We were doing a Muddy Waters tribute with Hubert Sumlin.

*Let's talk about your amps...*

Well, I'm still taking orders and building amps one at a time, but there is no more assembly line work. It isn't worth all of the money I was wasting on employees, but the thing that is keeping me real busy is a pedal I'm building called The Texas Ranger. It's based on the Rangemaster that was made by Jimmy Dallas—the same guy that made the Fuzzface, but it's different, because the original was a treble boost and I have treble, middle and low on mine. It hasn't been reviewed yet, but I still stay completely sold out. Then there's the Tremedillo—Keyboard Magazine called it the greatest tremolo of all time for keyboards, so I've had to learn how to deal with keyboard players now, in addition to guitar players (laughs). And I make the Texas Squareface, which is the same pedal that I made for Stevie, so I have 3 pedals keeping me fairly busy. I'm not making pedals just to make pedals, though. I make them because they are what I used as a guitar player—they have to be useful for me as well as anyone who is serious about playing guitar. I've been playing for 43 years, and I feel fortunate to have worked with all of the greatest guitar players—all of them, except maybe John Lennon and Jimi. In the course of getting to know so many great players and watching them work, I've received some great lessons, from Scotty Moore to Jeff Beck, and everyone in between. I've often been accused of not knowing how to climb the corporate ladder, but it doesn't matter, because I have my own ladder. My company may be small, but it's mine, and if something doesn't get done, it's only because I didn't get up that day and do it. I have no one else to blame. I've done it all on my own terms, and I've always believed that things should be digested, not eaten. Everything comes in its own time.

*Well said. How's your health now, Cesar?*

Well, I had to quit playing in Bob Dylan's band because I was very ill, and my life is more important than being up on stage. I had a couple of instances where I was hemorrhaging internally, but I'm OK now, after going through a couple months of rejection after the liver transplant. But I've already made up my mind that if I really do reject, I will die. I'm not going through this again. I have to take so many medications and shots, now. I became an insulin-dependent diabetic, and I wasn't told that any of this stuff was going to happen to me by the doctors. The steroids I have to take ruin your pancreas and your bones, and you know, I never was much of a druggie. If I had to hang out with someone who had to puff on something, then that was it, but I didn't have time to just sit around and get high. You have to be straight when you are in the position I was in, you know? I mean, you can't ask Bob Dylan to tune his own guitar—forget about it. He can't even take a shower...how can he tune his guitar (laughs)?

*Well, we hope things continue to get better for you.*

Yeah, I'm feeling better. I don't get many calls from Dylan, or Neil Young, or anyone I ever worked for, but that's fine. You have to realize that when they need you, they'll use you, and when they don't think they can use you, they don't need you. There's always someone behind you to take your place, and even if they can't really do the job, there are plenty of "yes" people available. I guess I have become very jaded about giving a chance to a younger person or even an older one. I usually say, "Well, if you haven't done it by now, how can you do it now?" That's life. If Chuck Berry had been a white man, he would have been the King of Rock & Roll.