

the ToneQuest The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone Report™

Pancho's Rig



Of course, the perfect segue would now be to decipher the “special” nature of the original output transformer in Neil Young’s narrow panel tweed *Deluxe*, providing you with a timeline in which these happy accidents appeared, or better yet, a source for clones of these special gems via, say, **Mercury**

Magnetics. Sorry... we asked, and while the guys at **Mercury** had heard the same story about the output transformer in Neil’s *Deluxe*, we can’t offer any definitive clues to what Larry described as “the most perfect way form.” However, we can immodestly suggest that you snag a *TQ Clarksdale* [ed. note: built using custom **Mercury Magnetics** trannys]—a faithful clone of our original 1959 *DeArmond* 1x12. It’s Neil’s amp in spades and he doesn’t even know it. The first batch of ten have been shipped and a gutsier, louder or more soulful 20 watt 1x12 has never been built. We can’t (and don’t) take credit for the original design—that belongs to an unknown engineer at *Rowe Industries* in Toledo, Ohio circa 1959—but we can state without any doubt whatsoever that the *Clarksdale* nails the tone and attitude of the original, and the original is the most impressive 1x12 we have ever heard. It’s got more bottom end and stronger mids than a tweed *Deluxe*, and where a *Deluxe* folds up, the *Clarksdale* roars all the way to “10.” Ain’t no quit in the *Clarksdale*, and like Neil Young’s *Deluxe*, a lot of the mojo is found in the *DeArmond*’s mammoth, original output transformer. Reference www.tonequest.com for more info, pictures and unsolicited comments from your fellow readers who now own *Clarksdales*.

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With Young’s legendary tweed *Deluxe* off the board, we chose to put the vintage *Vox AC50* Larry provided for Frank “Pancho” Sampedro on the *Ragged Glory* tour and recording sessions in play. Now, for those of you who tend to shy away from the potential compli-

cations that 40 year-old amps can present, the tale that follows will not inspire confidence, even though in the end, we did reach the promised land.

We found a 1965 gray panel *Vox AC50* on *eBay* with a “best offer” option. A search of previously completed auctions revealed that vintage *AC50s* had recently sold for anywhere from \$900 to \$1600 (more for the earliest, small box candy panel models with tube rectifiers). Since Larry’s “Pancho Vox” was a mid ’60s gray panel with silicone diode rectifiers, we made an offer of \$950 for the ’65, which the seller accepted. So far so good. When the amp arrived from Florida, however, we immediately noticed that the chassis had dropped inside the cabinet. Vintage *JMI Vox* chassis are mounted on a plywood shelf that allows the amp to slide in and out of the cabinet, and due to the seller’s pathetic packaging job, the plywood board in the *AC50* had splintered and cracked beneath the weight of the chassis. The shelf was shot, but since a cursory fire-up led us to believe the amp was in good working condition as advertised, we asked for and received a \$100 credit and cut a new plywood shelf for the *AC50* from a reproduction *AC30* cabinet we had used to house a vintage ’63 *AC30* head. Piece of cake, and a very quick and proper fix.

In the interest of authenticity, we also ordered a 4x12 cabinet loaded with aged *Celestion G12H30s* (*Hellatones*) from *Avatar Speakers*. They were running a clearance sale on loaded 4x12s for just \$378 and \$49 shipping, so we bit, and people, this cabinet kicks the living shit out of our vintage *Marshall* 4x12.

With the cabinet delivered, we were anxious to uncork the *AC50* at full roar, and we did—for maybe five minutes. The thick sound of the *Vox* filled the room, the house and the block with a gorgeous, incendiary bloom through the *Avatar* cab and our blacktop *Les Paul*, until the joyous noise was suddenly contaminated with a most noxious and fearsome popping, fizzing and spitting, while we sighted a glowing red spot on the plates in one of the *Svetlana EL34s*. Not good. Off to *Bakos Ampworks*....

After an hour of probing on the bench, Jeff asked, “Do you smell that? Man, I think the output transformer is smoked. It’s probably been going out for a

while.” Jeff patched in a substitute which eliminated the crackle-spit and confirmed, “It’s toast.” We immediately punched the number for **Mercury Magnetics**, and with our print deadline looming large, we had the Vox tranny shipped 3-day UPS from California. Jeff popped in the **Mercury ToneClone** tranny and replaced the original silicon diodes with FREDs. We also A/B’d an older pair of original “Winged C” Svetlana EL34s with a matched pair of NOS Tesla EL34s acquired from KCA NOS Tubes. At \$80/pair, the Teslas are reportedly comparable to NOS Mullards at more than three times the price. We also installed two lightly used Mullard ECC83s in the Normal channel and a spare NOS RCA 7025 and NOS Tesla in the Brilliant channel. But we were still missing an essential ingredient in the “Pancho” rig....

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With the Vox AC50 brought back from the brink and the ’57 Junior found, we were finally poised to experience Ragged Glory. We prudently set the volume controls for both channels of the Vox on “7,” following Larry’s recommendations for tone controls—treble dimed and the bass low. We’d ease into “10” on the volume controls later.... With a flick of the toggled tripwire the Vox lit up, and within 10 seconds the P90 was humming through the four Hellatones. We stepped back a few feet, brought the volume control on the Junior all the way up, turned away from the four twelves and cut loose with a tight, slashing chord progression out of E major. Digging deep into the Junior, the Vox responded as the twin EL34s became fully inflamed, gorging on 430 volts. The tone was thick, complex and gloriously ragged with a clarity, punch and trebly character that masked nothing—the perfect burning, churning, flannel and leather rhythm tone. Hit the low E string on a fat E major and it holds.... Come over the top with an upstroke on the E and B strings and the Vox responds with a gorgeous, penetrating cymbal splash that hangs as long as you wish. Need a dash more mids? Dial back the tone pot on the Junior, Pow! There it is. Thanks to the FREDs, the entire rig breathes with an extraordinary touch sensitive feel, and even on “7” the Junior could easily be coaxed into howling cries of polyphonic feedback. After 15 minutes, we reached over and dimed both volume controls.... Now we were welding some very serious shit—Mississippi Queen meets Powderfinger.... And this was 50 watts of classic, vintage Vox tone, mind you.... Harmonically richer, better endowed and far less linear and one-dimensional than a vintage Marshall—a cross-bred beast with a level of gain, distortion and raw heat far beyond the capabilities of any other vintage British amp unaided by a pedal. The tone, the vibe, the drama of this amp is stunning, and it left us wondering why the vintage AC50 gets so little respect. We can think of no other

vintage or current production amps that do what the Vox does. Not one. Of course, your results could vary, so here are a few tips for you brave souls willing to take the plunge.

Don’t be fooled into thinking that the Vox is solely a “rock” amp. Kid Ramos blew us away at a blues gig playing an AC30 with a Fender reverb box, and his was one of the best blues tones we’ve ever heard anywhere. Expect the same from an AC30.

Do not fear replaced transformers. You’ll pay less for the amp and the **ToneClone** replacements from **Mercury Magnetics** will outperform many tired originals.

Expect the unexpected and coolly deal with it. Vox amps aren’t Fenders—things like speed nuts on the chassis for the cabinet mounting screws are often missing or broken, but they can easily be replaced. Good tubes are also essential, but not every brand will provide reliable performance or the best tone in a Vox. You must also exercise extraordinary caution around the AC50 when handling the chassis outside the cabinet—even when performing simple tube swaps. The preamp tubes are mounted directly above two uncovered filter caps that remain hot even when the amp is unplugged. One slip and your Quest for Tone could be over.

Plan on investing in a thorough checkup by an experienced amp tech who can deal with cold solder joints, degraded components, old filter caps and proper biasing, before your amp takes a dump. Recommended amp techs follow, along with contact info for **Mercury Magnetics**.

Todd Sharp, www.amprepair.com

Don Butler, www.tone-man.com

Jeff Bakos, (404) 607-8426

Mercury Magnetics, www.mercurymagnetics.com