

The Low Down on the ... Fargen JW 40 Amp

We asked Benjamin Fargen and Mike Piera to comment separately on the development of the Weider Signature amp. Our review follows their interviews...

TQR: Briefly describe the process that was involved dialing in the tone of the amp—how you achieved the higher threshold of clean headroom and power in Channel One, and the Distortion Channel.



Fargen: I built the original JW-40 prototype amp for Jim in late 2004 and it was tweaked

over the course of two years as Jim played shows to support his album *Percolator*. I flew back to New York three times during the process for lone three day weekends of tone tweaking, listening and catching Jim at some live performances. Our job was to outperform Jim's favorite, modified blackface *Deluxe Reverb*, which had been his main amp for many years—not an easy task since the amp has some very special qualities that were essential to capture while retaining Jim's signature sound. We also matched it up to many other vintage *Fenders* and other high end amps that were in the same league, and when we finally surpassed all of them in tone and clean sustain, we knew we had a good design.

The original prototype amp had less headroom, so we decided to go with a slightly higher B+ voltage to squeeze a tad more headroom out of the amp for larger rooms and outdoor shows. We sorted through many different power transformers, output transformers and chokes from *Mercury Magnetics* before we found the correct match, and the feel and sound we were looking for.

TQR: The reverb seems to “sit” very nicely in the mix—not too splashy or pingy, and it doesn't add any unwanted overtones. Did you do anything unusual in designing it?



Fargen: It's similar to a classic *Fender*-style reverb with some tweaks to the overall EQ and the amount of return level reverb. I feel that the stock *Fender* design places too many mid and low mid frequencies in the mix, and I prefer more of a high end sparkle for the reverb to stand out. But the biggest problem with a stock *Fender*-style reverb is the way it can sometimes walk all over the note rather than *work* with it. The overall amount of reverb you allow to return to the revocery circuit is very critical to obtain a great sound.

TQR: Describe the *Slope* feature.

Fargen: The *slope* feature changes the overall frequency response of the EQ circuit to achieve greater flexibility when matching up different guitars and pickups with the JW-40. Jim and I felt it was nice to have other tonal options that changed the overall wide or narrow” character of the EQ structure. This came in really handy when switching between single coils and humbucking pickups.

TQR: Can you briefly summarize the effect the O-rings on the power tubes seem to have on the sound of the amp?

Fargen: The power/preamp tube dampening rings not only help to suppress microphonics and tube rattle, but they seem to produce a tighter sound with a very extended low end range. I find they are very useful for thickening up your amp tone at lower volumes, but some players may want to remove them for higher volume levels since the low end can become excessive with darker guitars or humbuckers.

TQR: What have you learned from the experienced designing, tweaking and dialing in this amp?

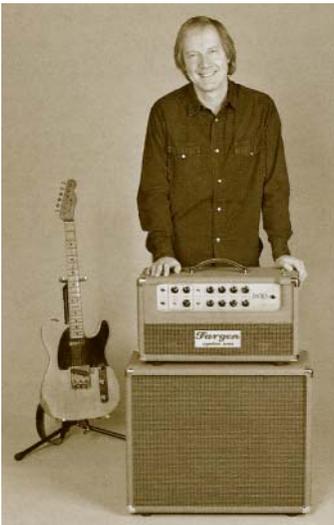
Fargen: Working on the JW-40 project with Jim has been a great experience—he's a great player with an amazing ear for tone. We worked very hard to achieve an amplifier design that not only exceeded Jim's needs and expectations from a signature amp, but would be well receive by other players. We set



out to deliver a classic guitar amplifier that offers a tone and feel that extends beyond even the best vintage examples that can be found, so this project really forced me to think outside of the box and develop many new techniques rather than just deliver one of my stock amplifiers to Jim with his name on it. It takes partnerships like this to shake up your normal routine so that you can push the envelope and continue to grow as a designer/builder. Because, as we all know—if you feel you have nothing left to learn, you should just quit now.

REVIEW

Fargen Jim Weider Signature Amp



It was clear the moment we played the first notes through the *Fargen JW-40* that someone with an extraordinary ear and deep experience had influenced the way this amp is voiced. The *Rhythm* channel pours out more clean, *Fendery* headroom than one of our favorite, more powerful blackface amps—the *Pro Reverb*—an the clean tones are richer, fuller, more detailed, lively and deeper. With the

Slope switch engaged in the *Rhythm* channel, the tone becomes even thicker in the upper mids, creating more of an EQ bump rather than a “boost” that ignites some kind of overdrive feature. We did notice some *boominess* in the low frequencies using a 4x12 cabinet loaded with *Celestion’s Gold Alnico G12s* and *G12H30s*, and in our *Balls 2x12* cabinet with an oval “football” open back design and British optimally voiced for an open back cabinet. There may also be some bias on our part at work here, because we have never cared much for the sound of a *Fender* amp with a closed back cabinet.

As noted in our discussion with *Ben Fargen*, the reverb in the *JW-40* is unique in the way it remains in the background, enhancing, but not overwhelming or washing over the notes. This is undoubtedly the best reverb sound in a combo amp we have ever heard for an understated effect, and even players that normally don’t use reverb may find it difficult to resist.



The *Lead* channel controls function much like an overdrive pedal, with *Drive*, *Level* and *Tone* controls and a toggled *Boost* switch. A *Midrange* control is also included. You couldn’t ask for a clearer, more intelligently designed control panel, and the controls themselves are simple and intuitive. As with many overdrive or boost pedals, mixing variable settings for *Drive* and *Level* pro-

duce a wide range of intensity, from a fat clean boost to rippin’ overdrive, but unlike a typical pedal, higher *Level* settings do not push the volume of the amp up to extremes as the *Level* is increased. In practical terms, this means that you can switch between the *Rhythm* and *Lead* channels without having to make dramatic adjustments to the volume on your guitar. We also discovered some incredibly tasty overdriven tones at very low volumes with the *Level* down and the *Drive* up—kind of like a ’50s *Gibson GA20* with more fidelity and no noise, and that’s a trick you can’t pull off with many distortion pedals. The *Tone* control helps shape and color the distortion EQ to suit differ-

ent guitars and moods, and it can also be used to subtly focus on specific harmonic overtones. But the most remarkable feature of the boost circuit is the “clean” character of the overdriven tone. *Mike Pira’s* mention of *David Gilmore* is instructive in this regard. *Gilmore’s* fat, overdriven guitar tones on his solos are indicative of the rich fidelity produced by the *JW-40*. Chords are clear with distinct note separation, sustain and decay are natural rather than sounding forced or artificially contrived, and the overall sound is round, rich and warm with a

sweet, clear top end.

Our best description of the overdriven voice of the *Fargen* is “majestic,” and who can’t live with that?



For our money, a simpler, better sounding or more versatile amp has

yet to be built, provided that you can use the power. *Fargen* uses *Mercury Magnetics* transformers and the *JW-40* is entirely handwired on an aluminum chassis.

Note the O-rings on the tubes... they are used to decrease microphonics, and as *Ben* observed, they also seem to impart an added measure of warmth to the tone of the amp. Those of you aching to lighten the load in your rig will also appreciate the fact that the *Fargen* head weighs just 36 pounds.

Fargen Amplification

Ben Fargen

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