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Title: I built an amp I would buy. (Matchless amplifiers)(includes related article on Matchless Pres./founder Mark Sampson's stint as salesman in Kunt Koupee Music, Minneapolis, MN)(Company Profile)

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Unhappy With New Amps, Mark Sampson Didn't Just Build An Amp He Liked, He Launched A Company. Now Matchless Is Riding The Crest Of A Retro Wave.

Just how roadworthy are Matchless amplifiers? Sitting in the corner of the company's modern factory in Santa Fe Springs, California, is a corroded, bashed-up amplifier that looks like it toured the world being dragged from the back bumper of a bus. Two years ago this Matchless Chieftain Reverb was ripped from its owner's home in Japan by a tidal wave and spent three days floating in the ocean. How does the story end? Its owner returned the amp to the factory, where it was found to be in perfect playing condition. The only part of this story that someone familiar with Matchless amps might find hard to believe is the fact that the ultra-heavy-duty amp floated and didn't sink. "We hear stories about our amps surviving falls off a bus or stage, but getting carried out to sea by a tidal wave is pretty wild," remarked Mark Sampson, president. "We wanted to keep the amp, so we sent the owner a brand-new replacement."

Durability is just one of many reasons why guitarists around the world and editors at guitar publications consistently rave about Matchless amplifiers. "The Matchless Chieftain stands head and shoulders above with rest with its richness and complexity," wrote a reviewer at Guitar Player in December 1995. An earlier

review stated, "The Matchless D/C-30 lives up to its name in all aspects and is a totally Pro piece of gear. If you want the best, this is it." Is all this hype about Matchless warranted, or is it to be expected since the products carry lofty prices that typically range from \$1,500 to \$5,000 retail? A close look at how Matchless evolved from Mark Sampson's amplifier repair bench in Iowa reveals how this company builds a unique product and along the way has built a thriving business making the finest possible guitar amplifier.

The origins of Matchless amps trace back to the early 1980s when Mark Sampson was making a living repairing and trading vintage amplifiers. "The vintage movement had yet to be defined or even recognized. At the time, there was a very small group of people who, like me, wanted to perform with vintage amps like the Vox AC-30. Since the vintage amps were old and extremely unreliable, I could make a living repairing them for people," he recalled. To put the lackluster nature of the market in perspective, Sampson explained, "The going rate today for a 1958 Tweed Fender Bassman is \$3,000. Back then it was great if you could sell one for \$400."

Sampson not only repaired hundreds of different vintage amps in his small shop in Iowa, but he also bought, sold, or traded well over 1,000 amps. "My repair experience gave me great insights into how different designs and components generated different sounds. During my years trading and repairing vintage amps, I owned more than 500 Vox AC-30s and created a database cataloging everything I could about each one."

Sampson soon found demand for his services so great with musicians in California that he moved his business to Burbank, California, in 1989. It was there that he teamed up with a friend, Rick Perotta, and began work on a new proprietary guitar amp. "There was nothing currently being manufactured that I or any of my friends wanted to buy. So Rick and I set out to build an amp that was roadworthy and that sounded as good, if not better than, a vintage amplifier. We

also wanted it to be a little modern with things like speaker phasing so in the studio you could use it with other amps and have correct phase."

Sampson spent the next six months refining a transformer design. "Making the right transformer is important because it's the heart of the amplifier. If it's not done right, it doesn't matter how good the rest of it is, it just isn't going to sound good." Sampson created a transformer with a range of 15-20 wire wraps separated by paper insulation. "It has to be made by hand, or it won't sound right," he warns.

He was equally diligent in selecting components and designs. "We took our specs and selected components that could handle a minimum of twice the capacity," he said. Resistors in amps of this size are typically 1/2 watt. Sampson insisted on one- to two-watt resistors, which typically cost 10 to 20 times as much. Costly Teflon wire, which can withstand torch temperatures without melting, was used throughout. All fragile components, namely tubes like EL84, were protected with porcelain tube sockets with silicon shock mounts. Potentiometers were extra-heavy-duty; and rather than opt to save money with a chipboard cabinet, expensive 11-ply, furniture-grade birch wood was used throughout.

Most tube and solid-state amps have two sections: one amplifies the positive half of the waveform while the other amplifies only the negative portion. In a conventional design, the amp turns off the section it's not using at any given moment, allowing tubes to work 50% of the time and cool down during rest cycles. Called AB design, this type of amp generally produces more output. "Everyone seemed to love this style, but I found that I liked the sound of the Class A amplifiers I worked on better, as did a lot of my clients," explained Sampson. Thus Matchless amps utilize a Class A design, where the two amp halves never shut off. Instead, each idles while the other is in use, resulting in

less output from the same power supply. "The sound is definitely better, but you have to have some clever engineering because Class A amps run hot."

Sampson's first amps were emblazoned with the name Matchless. The name came from a once-prominent British manufacturer of motorcycles and established an English connection that the two young partners felt was important. It took 38 hours to build a single amp, so Rick and Mark did not entertain visions of one day producing Matchless amps in huge quantities. "Our real concern was: Is our amp any good?" Their question was answered by a chance encounter with Jackson Browne, who asked that they leave their amp in his recording studio. Sampson recalled that a week later he got a call from Browne's manager, explaining that Mr. Browne didn't want to give the amp back. "I remember him telling me, 'Name your price. Jackson Browne has to have your amp.'"

The sale to Jackson Browne was soon followed by a last-minute rush to participate in Guitar Player magazine's head-to-head comparison of 14 all-tube combo amps (March 1992). Testers were unanimous in their selection of Matchless as the "hands-down" favorite, saying: "The Matchless sounded great no matter who played through it with what guitar." "That publicity put us on the map, and we've been growing every month since," reported Sampson.

In early 1994 Sampson and his partners sold Matchless to U.S. Music Corporation (parent company of Guild, Randall, and Vinci Strings). One year later, when U.S. Music was dismantled (Guild was sold to Fender, and Randall Was sold to Washburn), Sampson reacquired the company and relocated manufacturing to a new facility in Sante Fe Springs, California. The factory today operates with a staff of 30.

Will the consumer craze for tubes, a trend that hastened the success of Matchless, one day disappear as quickly as it appeared? Sampson responded, "Trends come and go, but I think the market for top-end, high-quality product is timeless. The retro movement is based on a bunch of components that are not

fad-oriented. From my perspective, a quality product like Matchless will never go out of style."

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Koupee Music in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and learned a valuable lesson that has been integrated into the design of every Matchless amplifier. "I've limited the range of controls on Matchless amps, so you can't dial up a bad sound," he said. "Your typical guitar amp customer will rifle through three amps in about 20 seconds. If he doesn't like the sound, regardless of the price or brand, he won't buy it. Consumers lose interest incredibly fast when they're buying an amp."

Amp manufacturers like Matchless are pushing the price envelope just as guitar manufacturers have in the last three years. Are there people who pay \$5,000 for an amp? "You bet," responded Sampson, adding, "Our cheapest amp lists for \$1,399, and our factory, with a staff of 30, is running flat-out with a 90-day waiting list. Dealers....Don't underestimate the buying power of Generation X-ers."

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