

to amps equipped with 15" speakers. We ran the H62 through Chris Kramer's older Clark Penrose – Michael Clark's take on a tweed narrow panel Pro loaded with a Weber Alnico Classic 15, and the vibe was predictably old school with lots of boxy acoustic character, snappy, single coil top end and deep midrange tones. You could hear the NOS 5881's responding to the strings. For those of you craving a Clark, Chris is selling the Penrose having just scored a lower-powered vintage Magnatone. E-mail him at georgiajooks@mindspring.com. We also played the H62 through our 1960 brown Pro – a less subtle and bigger sounding amp lacking a tube rectifier and loaded with an Eminence Legend 15, which really helps the low strings pop. Churning out big chords on the Harmony through the Pro transformed it into an impressive percussion instrument in much the same way the big Gibson, D'Angelico and Stromberg acoustic archtops were used in the big band era, which reminded us that we could have used a few lessons from Lou Pallo...

You don't string an archtop like the H62 with .010's, which places it squarely among the most manly of guitars. Unless your name is Bob Margolin, strings bends will be limited with a typical set of .011's or .012's. However, we think it a good thing indeed to be forced into *not* depending on string bends. For some players, the H62 will reveal some uncomfortable holes in their technique (ours included) while at the same time encouraging untapped creativity inspired by a guitar with a completely distinctive, older-than-dirt tone.

A vintage L5, Super 400 or ES350 aren't in most players' future, and while the Harmony archtops aren't as cheap today as they have been in the past, they are still a decent bargain at \$800-\$1600 and will only continue to appreciate with time. If jazz or blues are part of your repertoire, these guitars are definitely worth finding, restoring and enjoying. A "cheap" guitar like the H62 by 1955 standards is still pretty damn good... **To**

Resources

Reference these web sites for information on Harmony and Silvertone history and models:

www.broadwaymusicco.com/HARMONY.htm

<http://members.aol.com/Rothguitar/Rothguita30.html>

www.doctoraudio.us/Silvertone/silvertone.html (*The Tone Zone*, CeeJay Jones)

For rewinds and repairs of vintage Harmony and Silvertone pickups:

Brett Brubaker 515-991-7303

Guitar Repair & Restoration:

George Goumas, Fretworks (New Jersey) 732-316-9737

Eric Miller, Hands on Guitars (Washington)
360-740-9158

Joe Glaser (Nashville) 615-298-1139

Gary Brawer (San Francisco) 415-621-3904

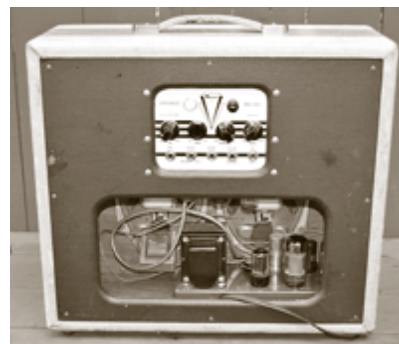
'57 Supro Brentwood 1659T



For players seeking the authentic guitar tones found on old blues vinyl, amplifiers built during the same era can offer a vibe that new amps just don't replicate. Why? Well, many of the basic

designs used for vintage '50s Fender, Gibson, Valco, Magnatone and Danelectro amps were long ago cast aside for more modern, complex circuits, and with those designs went the raw, unadorned, honest character found in so many amplifiers from the '50s and early '60s. Aside from their collectable appeal, old amps definitely have a sound... but is it your sound?

When Junior Watson alerted us to the mojo of vintage Rola 6x9 speakers, we perked up and began searching for an amp so equipped. Sure, we had occasionally seen 6x9's before, but why would we want a pair of 'car speakers' in an amp? What we found is a rare and remarkably clean 1957 Supro "Brentwood" with twin Alnico Rola 6x9's in exceptional condition. At \$750, the Brentwood wasn't cheap, but that's what you'll pay today for such a rare gem in extraordinary condition, and what the hell... this *is* the quest for tone. You gotta pay to play. We had a pretty good idea of what we were getting into even before the amp arrived from the seller – a harp player named Cloyd in Sparks, Georgia, who advised us that having pried the Supro from him, we had left a trail of very unhappy harp and guitar players in our wake.



The Brentwood model 1659T was the top of the Valco line in 1957 with tremolo, dual 6L6's, 6AX5 rectifier, and 6SC7, 6SQ7, 6SJ7 and 5879 preamp tubes, all of which are vintage NOS in our

amp. The Brentwood boasts two "regular" instrument inputs, a "treble" input and a "high gain" microphone input – the tantalizingly mysterious hole that gives harp players chromatic palpitations. It's also where the magic can be found for guitar...

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Even at low volume settings, the Brentwood boldly awakens and breathes with thick dynamic compression, ridiculously lush harmonic depth, and musical, polyphonic sustain and distortion unlike any other amp we've ever owned or played. But the old Valco's singular charm was only fully revealed when we heard Delta Moon slide guitarist Mark Johnson deftly milk the Rolas with our '57 Les Paul Junior in open G. The amp responded to every nuance of Mark's deft fingerpicking and slide technique with amazing transparency – alternately sagging and opening up when pushed, singing with sustain at the slightest fingernail touch, and sending full chords soaring with every string defined, yet intertwined in a sonic orgy that left us stunned and humbled. Just when you think you've heard it all, amplifiers like this change the way you hear tone forever. But should you carelessly pummel the Brentwood with heavy-handed rock riffs



and power chords, it will falter and stumble, its apparent strengths now glaring weaknesses, revealing an important lesson that is so often overlooked by reviewers... Certain

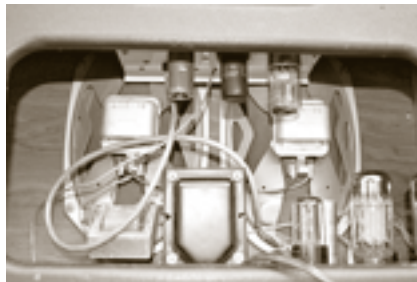
amplifiers and guitars excel at fulfilling very specific roles within a finite range of musical styles. Used appropriately, these instruments perform brilliantly, but when their true purpose (intended or accidental) fails to be considered and carefully explored, the potential for discovery on the scale of our experience with the Brentwood can be completely lost. The rigid, mythical consensus view held by the masses as to what constitutes the most desirable guitars and amps is not only horribly flawed – their lack of creative thought and blind allegiance to conventional “wisdom” imposes the artificial illusion of a dead



Jimmy Page's Supro

end street in the quest for tone in which an amp like the Supro Brentwood would remain marginalized and overlooked, unless of course, Jimmy Page had played it. (He didn't play a Supro Thunderbolt, either, contrary to popular myth.)

In contrast to the Brentwood's magical microphone input, the “regular” and “treble” channels yield a cheap, bluesy, low-volume, Chess records 2-track vibe, and we're going to explore the possibilities of restoring the full volume found in the mic input to an additional channel. But despite the curiously neutered character of the other inputs, the tweedy Brentwood is an all-tube time machine with one setting on the dial pointing to 1957, and riding it is an unforgettable trip that no new amp can ever provide.



The original 6x9 Rola speakers roll tight and right in a low powered, somewhere-around-15-watt rig like the Brentwood, doing a nice imi-

tation of a vintage Jensen P10R, yet rounder sounding with fuller midrange response, not quite so chiseled on the top, and with a surprisingly big bottom end. Despite the presence of dual 6L6's and its big power transformer, the Brentwood does not crank out stage volumes suitable for anything but small stages occupied by a fairly polite rhythm section – but miked, slaved, or for recording, the grease will coat the walls, turn heads, and create tales of legendary tone in the right hands. The tremolo is predictably spooky, with a wide range of speeds that varies between the quick-time wobbly-weave of George Jones gassed on a fifth of Dickel doing a road-side sobriety test on I65, and the slow pulse of a hibernating king snake. But again, it's the gonzo “microphone” channel that ups the ante with old school attitude completely worthy of Cooder, Watson, Sumlin & King. With vintage guitar prices through the roof, the stratosphere and beyond, these cool old amps may be the last affordable resort for players on a budget. If you pay attention and you got some chops, they will rock your world. Quest forth while you can. **To**

by Vintage Volume Tube Amps
Lindy Fralin Amp



On the other hand, if you're inspired to run down some musty Fullerton tweed, we'll assume you are also fully prepared to bend over 'til it hurts. Well, know this... There is little correlation between the absolute cer-

*tainty that you will pay a considerable premium for an unmo-
lested, vintage tweed Fender amp today and an iron-clad
promise of awe-inspiring tone. As we've said before, the mar-
ket value for vintage instruments and amps doesn't carry an
implied warranty... You are paying a premium for a collecta-
ble amp or guitar based solely on its collectable value; the*

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extent to which it may fulfill its intended purpose to your dismay or delight is a crapshoot, unless of course, you are able to try before you buy. This didn't matter much when tweed was \$50 trash, but throwing down a minimum of two grand today is no joke.

There is a less risky and expensive route on the quest for tone, which is to buy a new amp made by people who have figured out how to actually design and build *exceptional* sounding tools with repeatable consistency. Perhaps you are the type who is risk-averse, unwilling or afraid to adopt an old amp that may need to be fortified by skilled hands at \$75/hour. Well, we've found another stellar new amp, and it carries the familiar name of Lindy Fralin. No, Fralin didn't personally build it, but it is built to his specifications and personal preferences by Vintage Vacuum Tube Amps in Waldorf, Maryland, which is close enough to Lindy Fralin's shop in Richmond, Virginia to have fostered a very productive collaborative relationship.

Lindy Fralin is one of the best known custom pickup makers in the country and an experienced guitarist with an extensive collection of vintage amps. But despite his fat collection, he found himself craving things that weren't collectively found in any one of his vintage amps. Fralin wanted clean headroom at volume levels that could hang with a band in a small to medium-sized club. He also insisted that such an amp be portable enough to be effortlessly carried up and down the



stairs in his house and back and forth to gigs. He wanted reverb, and a smooth, musical voice that was compatible with all of his many guitars, and the amp had to be a looker in a dignified, classic sense – not too plain or gaudy in an effort to appear different or unique.

Fralin and the two founders of VVT spent months working on various prototypes, which involved several rounds of experimentation with custom transformers built by Mercury Magnetics. Once the basic layout was determined, different caps, resistors, tube configurations and speakers were tested, and work continued until Fralin finally heard the sound and feel he had been craving in his head.

The result is a remarkable 30 watt, 1x15" cathode biased beauty that can run on dual 6L6's for maximum headroom or 6V6's for slightly faster breakup. Features are simple and straightforward with just a bright switch, volume, treble, bass and reverb controls. We ran the Fralin through its paces with



all of our usual test guitars, and we were consistently impressed with the sound of them all, as well as the huge spring reverb, loads of clean headroom and subtle distortion at higher volumes that adds sustain without substantially altering the beauty of the fundamental note. As we played Fralin's amp, reoccurring visions of Peter Green's brilliant tone came to mind... clean, exceptionally smooth, warm and round with the perfect edge, enabling the guitar to alternate between sweetness and urgency as dictated by the song. Our impression was also echoed by the *other* guitarist in Delta Moon, Tom Gray. Tom plays slide using acoustic Weissenborn-style guitars loaded with a Sunrise soundhole pickup. Prior to hearing the Fralin, Tom's stage rig consisted of a blackface Pro reverb head



paired with a separate 1x15 cabinet and an Avalon preamp identical to that used by Clapton for his acoustic guitars, live. After Tom played the Fralin amp sent to us for review, he bought it, and now no longer even needs the Avalon.

Aside from looking good and weighing barely 30 pounds, Fralin's amp incorporates an "Integral Beam Diffuser" – a wooden cross-piece cut out of the baffleboard that bisects the speaker behind the grille cloth, diffusing the sound waves as they come off the speaker cone. Fans of larger '60s Supro amps may be familiar with a similar cross-piece found in those amps, and it does indeed produce a sound that is less beamy and linear (especially helpful when you're crammed on to a tight stage with the amp on the floor.) You really can *hear* it better.

VVT's Fralin amp is simply a compact, lightweight, heavy-duty gig monster, and it definitely deserves your attention. The Weber Classic Alnico 15 thrives on every frequency you can throw at it in the Fralin, and we recommend this amp without reservation for blues, heavy rockin-blues, jazz, country, swing... everything but hard rock and metal. For that, check out the other amps built by VVT. www.vvtamps.com

www.vvtamps.com, 301-396-4100
www.fralinpickups.com, 804-358-2699