

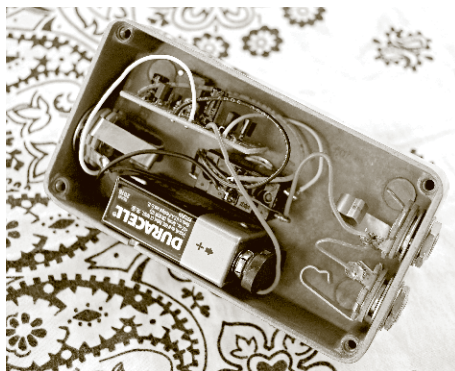
DD3 delay and the venerable (not *venereal* you idiot) Lazy J Deuce Cruiser seemed unwise. First or last also makes it a lot easier to pull the Hard-On out of the signal chain to conserve power when you're not using it. Stand down, soldier!



Controls are prehistoric – one footswitch and a single knob labeled (not *labium* you idiot) 'Crackle Okay.'

According to Vex, the "Crackle Okay" volume knob is a negative-feedback control styled after classic '60s recording console inputs. It does indeed crackle when you turn it, among other things...

As Tommy Malone observed, you could use the Hard-On as a fuller, subtle clean boost and leave it on at lower settings all night long with no changes in the fundamental tone of your rig except that it might sound better. The 'clean' effect is that good, adding just enough to make your guitar sound bigger without adding distortion. Gradually advancing the control beyond 9 o'clock adds distortion and an overdriven sound that retains the natural unaffected tone of your guitar and amp with increasing intensity and sustain as you turn the knob. For us, the usable



range of the SHO falls within the 8 o'clock to 12 o'clock range. We're not suggesting that settings beyond 12 are unusable – far from it. The level of burn

enters the realm of a cranked Boogie and metal tones that we were able to push through our blackface Tremolux set on a clean '6' on the volume control. We should also mention that despite the power of the SHO, high frequencies emanating from the B and E strings never sound sharp, razory or brittle. The SHO produces smooth and musical distortion throughout its considerable range, and across all six strings. In other words, you get no big midrange bump, no tunnel tone where your guitar is compressed into specific frequencies, no jagged or sharp edges, no mud or undesirable distortion artifacts – just fat, rich cleans and fully engorged overdriven tones that leave you feeling cocky and satisfied. The Z Vex Super Hard-On may not be the pedal you would comfortably take to your church gig, but for all other locations it remains among the most toneful and useful overdrive pedals ever built, yesterday or today. **To**

[www.zvex.com](http://www.zvex.com)

## LaGrange

*If you have been paying attention and your mind ain't gone, you'll remember Texan John Grammatico and his reverent take on the narrow panel tweed Bassman presented here a few years back. He named it the Kingsville, it sounded fine, and Jimmie Vaughan became one of the Kingsville's biggest fans. Grammatico has built a new little 1x12 in deference to those who can't really tote a 40 watt 4x10 combo, and he had the balls to name it the LaGrange. Well, why not? John sent us an amp for review, and we asked him to describe the inspiration for his latest creation. Enjoy...*

**TQR:** The last time we spoke you had completed the Kingsville – your take on the 4x10 Bassman that was embraced by Jimmie Vaughan. What inspired the 1x12 La Grange?



Thanks to Jimmie, the Kingsville has gotten some good live exposure. I've received a significant amount of e-mails from people who said that they love the tone of the Kingsville, but were concerned that it would be too much amp for them and they asked if I was making anything smaller. After a few years it was time to bring new models to the brand. I

was commissioned to build several amps of a tweed Deluxe style which made the R&D possible, so I decided to make it the next model. The LaGrange is a logical continuance of my experience and knowledge of tweed tone but in a smaller package while providing a dirtier rocking tone at a more reasonable volume level.

**TQR:** Lots of 20 watt amps are being built today with variable similarities to the original tweed 5E3 Deluxe circuit. What can you tell us about your

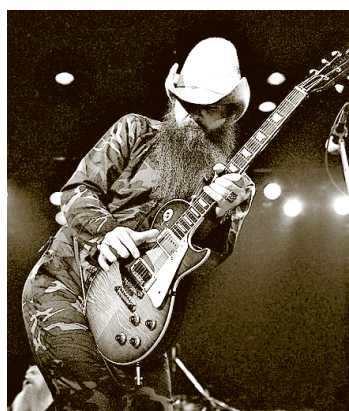


new amp in terms of unique design characteristics, components, and the specific goals you had in mind in terms of tone?

I've had the privilege of hearing many vintage amplifiers, some

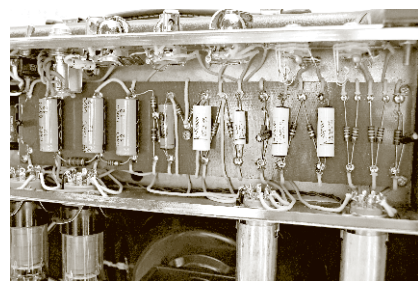
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of them pristine, untouched examples, and I have found that they never seem to sound as good as the great classic recordings I know so well. I came to the conclusion that in addition to the great amps used, at least some of the magic happened in the studio with great microphones, preamps, boards, compressors, analog tape, etc. contributing to those great recorded tones. So rather than attempting to copy any specific amplifier exactly, I use them as a starting platform and recordings become the reference.



The goal for the sound of the LaGrange was to capture the tones of many of the great blues and rock records. Such artists as Billy Gibbons, Keith Richards, Neil Young, Tom Petty, Elmore James, Peter Green, Kenny Burrell and many others. I set out to make it sound organic, woody and

creamy with just enough metallic spank and sparkle to give it some bite, bringing out the natural sounds of the guitar. Many players have several guitars and can have quite a bit invested in them, so ideally you want to hear the subtle differences that makes them special and unique. I don't want to mask those organic subtleties with a dominant synthetic plastic and veiled sound imposed by the amp. I wanted a dense, thick sound that stayed focused when turned up with a slightly rounded off top end, putting the energy mainly in the mids where it would sound fat in the mix. It should also maintain clarity and articulation while singing really well with lots of natural sustain and harmonics, with no raspy, grainy brittleness. I also wanted the amp to have a usable, interesting clean tone with decent headroom that can fill a room and sound big, round, warm and liquid, punchy and touch sensitive.

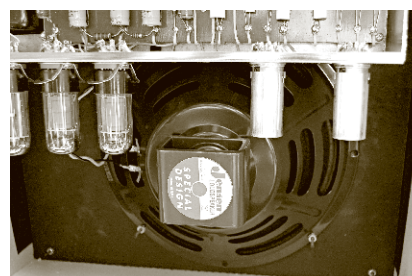


I wasn't able to achieve these qualities with standard off the shelf parts. Some of the things that affect the tone of the amp are the lengths and

layout of the custom cloth wire, the design of the transformers using the right steel grades, the turns on the windings and the insulation material and the varnish formulation used to impregnate the paper layers. The Jupiter capacitors though expensive, have an authentic tone and break up characteristics that fit the amp. The most demanding aspect in developing an authentically vintage sounding amp is using all new produc-

tion components. It would be much easier to get the results with old parts, but another important design feature is the reliability and consistency of building with fresh new parts. Above all, I set out to make an amp that's musically engaging and inspiring to play.

**TQR:** Are you offering any options in regard to speakers or optional features?



I tried out many speakers before choosing the Jensen P12Q. When used in the LaGrange it has a wonderful smoky quality, sweet rounded highs,

nice low end bark, throaty mids and the right mix of grind and chunk when pushed. Other speakers I would consider offering are the Celestion Blue and the Alnico Gold, an alnico Fane and the Eminence Eric Johnson speaker. Different tolex options are also available. The stock model is \$1850 and is built to order. It can be purchased with PayPal through the Grammatico website at [www.grammaticoamps.com](http://www.grammaticoamps.com).

## Uh, Something's Burning...



*Formerly home to the infamous brothel known as the "Chicken Ranch,"*

*LaGrange remains a charming little town of roughly 5,000 soulful souls located half way between Austin and Houston on Highway 71. The brothel was closed down in 1973, but immortalized in song by ZZ Top, of course. LaGrange was originally*

*settled by Czech and German immigrants, and that heritage remains evident at Hruska's Store & Bakery where traditional kolaches are served, the Prause Meat Market (sausages and barbecue), Weikel's Bakery and the Rohan Meadery. Na zdraví!*

John Grammatico's LaGrange impresses us as a basic, custom-built booteek 1x12 amplifier that sits squarely in the wheelhouse of many players today, and especially those

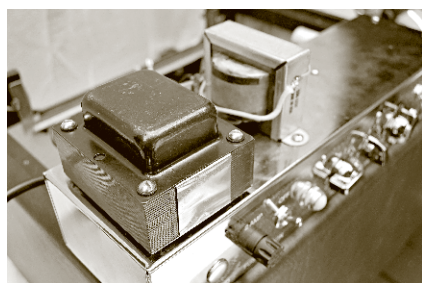


who aren't looking for an amp to use in cavernous arena gigs, although we're not suggesting you couldn't mic it for those, too. As for Grammatico, he builds amplifiers that

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are based on his own personal gestalt, and you are likely to find some unique if not obscure component choices under the hood. He isn't the best known custom amp builder when one considers the meteoric rise of builders like Michael Swart, but past experience leads us to believe that Grammatico is happy doing things his way while not being too concerned about becoming a commercial phenomenon. If it happens, fine, but he isn't going to pander to the flavor of the month crowd.



Cosmetically, the oxblood version of the LaGrange we received presents an image more in common with a vintage Gibson than a Fender amp. The

4-input chrome control panel with single tone control and dual input Normal and Bright channels follows the familiar 5E3 Deluxe layout, as does the presence of dual 12AX7s and 6V6s with a 5Y3 rectifier. The cabinet is constructed of solid pine with a painted plywood baffle, and Grammatico has chosen to use the alnico Jensen P12Q speaker – in our opinion one of the very best among all Jensen speakers being made today.

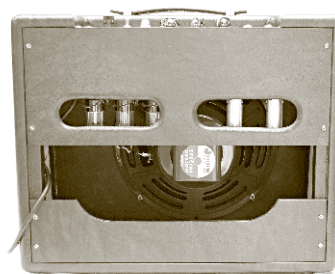
Whether you play guitars with single coil or more powerful humbucking pickups, the LaGrange offers limited clean headroom above '4' on either volume control, the #2 inputs



being slightly cleaner than the first. In this regard it seems to share the character of many tweed Deluxe replicas, and while you can play somewhat clean

(especially with single coils) at low volume levels, Grammatico's amp seems best suited for mild to harder rockin' overdriven tones that intensify as the volume and treble controls are advanced. We prefer the Bright channel, noting that the LaGrange remains very well-balanced with a full and even frequency response that you don't always hear in 15-20 watt dual 6V6 amps. Treble tones are bright without sounding thin, midrange is robust, and the low end remains surprisingly stout, solid and unyielding, even at high volume levels or when using overdrive effects. The LaGrange sounds like a booteek amp should – rich and musical, dynamically pleasing in the 'feel' department with smooth sustain and deeply complex overtones. Cranked, it is fully capable of producing modern levels of intense distortion and sustain that were unimaginable in 1959 – distortion fully worthy of your favorite burningest rock tones, pedals not required. In this regard,

like a pert and demure young math teacher we once met who turned into an insatiable she-devil rapist behind closed doors, looks are completely deceiving.



If you think you could use a featherweight and uncomplicated little amp with a comfy leather handle that is equally capable of swampy slide tones, jangly rhythms, bluesy leads, and the mighty siren roar of the impending apocalypse, that would indeed be the Grammatico LaGrange. Hitch up yer pants, cowboy, hide the wimmen and chillun and Quest forth...**TO**

[www.grammaticoamps.com](http://www.grammaticoamps.com), 512-535-3985

## REVIEW

# Cornell Plexi



Ten years ago we noted that Denis Cornell's Plexi was one of the best-sounding amplifiers we had ever heard. In that

respect, nothing has changed. We may have been the first to feature an in-depth interview with Denis in 2003, and at that time his distribution in America was not fully developed. Having played one of Jeff Bakos' '69 Marshall PA20 heads and acquired one of our own for \$900 in 2001, our sights were set high when the Cornell Plexi arrived. The market for 18 and 20 watt Marshall-style amps had yet to fully ignite in 2001, and the compact little PA20 covered in vintage green tolex remained a real sleeper as vintage amps go.

Today the popularity of the Marshall 18 and 20 watt amps seems to have surged, crested and perhaps resided slightly



since the days when so many small builders were mining these simple circuits and interest was white hot in the 18 watt Club on the web. Even Marshall eventually succumbed to building

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