

electro-harmonix

MIKE MATTHEWS

Photo by Anthony Rubolotta

— INTERVIEW —
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THE MUSE MASTER



Words by Ian Garrett
Photos Courtesy Electro Harmonix

Tone Report Weekly: You graduated with two degrees from Cornell University, a BS in electrical engineering '62 and a MBA '66 from the Johnson School of Management. What did you do after college?

Mike Matthews: While I was at Cornell, I started booking shows both locally and then later in New York City. Being around different musicians and watching how things developed was fun for a while, but then I took a job with IBM. I actually learned a lot about business from IBM, and I didn't mind the corporate culture at all, which probably surprises some people. After about three years, I decided it was time to go out on my own, at which point I helped founded Electro Harmonix.

TRW: One of your earliest creations was the LBP-1 (boost), and then not long after came the Big Muff. Did you ever imagine these two products would become such big hits?

MM: The LPB-1 is a very simple 1 transistor circuit, but it helped revolutionize music. Back then, amps just couldn't distort easily by themselves. The LPB-1 would help by pushing amps to levels of distortion that hadn't been done before. We still sell 600



a month even today, and we sell over 3,000 Big Muff variations every month, too.

TRW: Today there are hundreds of boutique companies out there that make various versions of the Big Muff and other EHX pedals. Is this a good or bad thing?

MM: Good and bad. We don't have a patent on the Big Muff, so it isn't like anyone is breaking the law. But if someone is buying a competitor's Big Muff and not mine, I'm losing business. So we have to stay competitive, offer new variations, and keep our quality high and prices low. That is something most of the smaller companies can't do, because they don't have the volume of business we have.

TRW: EHX has had a lot of big hits over the years, but you've managed to do it by going down the road less traveled. EHX pedals have always had a certain level of cool quirkiness to them. Was this part of the plan, or did it just happen naturally?

MM: We've had a different philosophy all along. Boss, for example, used to have



a powerful development team, but one thing they always did was to filter out the noise. Their products could almost be described as sterile or safe. We might make a product that has less filtering with controls that can take you to extremes, a little more noise maybe, but we do it so you can create that sound you're after, for your own unique tone. Music isn't sterile; it can be messy, and that's all right.

TRW: You started out as an analog company, but you've grown to embrace digital. And yet you haven't forgotten those analog roots. How do you combine both technologies?

MM: Both technologies are important, and we don't shy away from either. There are some companies that can only do analog – they just don't have the engineers needed to delve deeply into the digital side. But I like both, and I don't like being limited to just one type of technology.

TRW: How do you come up with new ideas at EHX? Is it you alone, a couple of other engineers, a collaborative effort, or some combination of all of the above?

MM: Well, at this point, I'm usually the "main" idea guy. I look for holes in the market, ideas for products that will have the best bet for good returns. And then our engineering team looks to add special features and how a particular

pedal will actually work. We have over 100 items at EHX now, and that's a lot! But we're always looking for new ideas, and that is where everyone plays a role. For example, the Freeze pedal was an idea that came from our Hog pedal, but then our engineers came up with additional ideas and features, and the Superego came out of their contributions especially its effects loop, which lets the player invent his or her own effects.

TRW: What's next on the horizon at EHX? Do you plan out 1-2 years in advance or have a longer time schedule?

MM: We have a lot of products coming out. In fact, what we have coming out right now is almost in response to where the market has been going over the last several years. About a year or two ago, I realized we were missing out on coming up with popular overdrives, so now there's the EHX East Side Drive – our take on the popular Tubescreamer. We also have Soul Food, our version of the popular but super expensive Klon. The new Satisfaction fuzz is based on the old classic Fuzztone pedal. We'll have more loopers coming too, to compete with the smaller, cheaper looper pedals that are popular right now.

TRW: How come there's no EHX Tuner?



MM: I get asked that a lot, but it's already done well by others, so I don't see a big need for us to do the same thing.

TRW: In addition to making these classic pedals, you're making some unique stuff, too, like the Next Step wahs and pitch shifters. This sounds like it is going to be a busy year for you.

MM: Yeah, we're going full throttle right now. There is a JFET designed overdrive and preamp coming out in a few weeks called the EHX Tortion that sounds terrific. Plus the Superego,

Ravish and Freeze were somewhat unique pedals for us. And we'll be doing some updates of classic pedals too, like a Deluxe Big Muff.

TRW: I see some of the EHX classics coming in smaller packages too, like the Nano Big Muff and Hot Tubes Nano. What else might we see?

MM: We'll have to see. I thought the Nano Big Muff would kill the classic big box Muff in terms of sales, but the classic is still doing well. However, the Nano boxes are more cost effective for us in both production and



shipping, so I'd like to go that route eventually with more of our classic pedals.

TRW: I see you don't ignore bass players either. I bet they appreciate that!

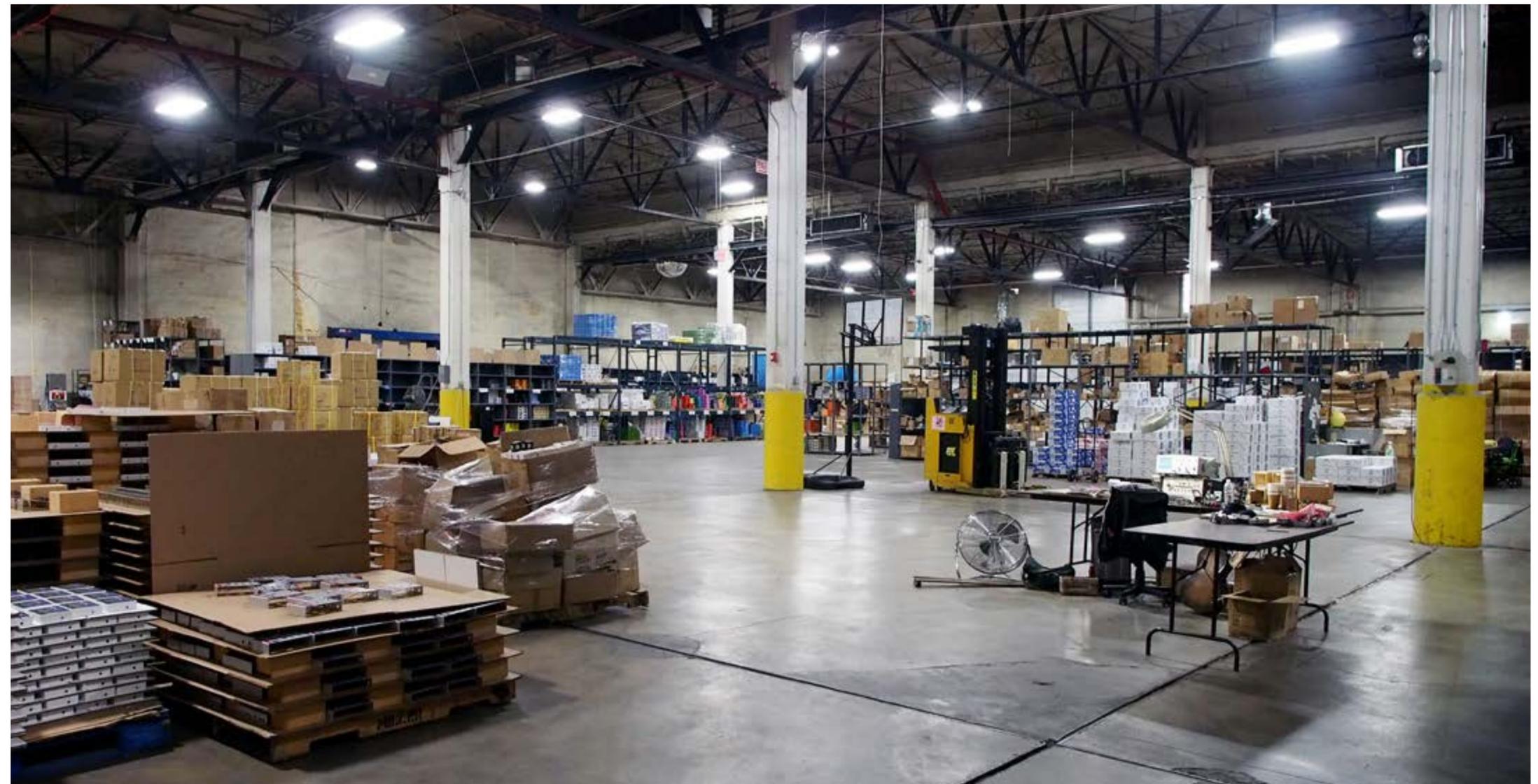
MM: Yeah, we've had a few hits on the bass side of things too. But I'm not sure they're always used by bassists. The bass big muff, for example, is really popular with guitarists, as well, as it is based on our classic Russian Muff pedal.

TRW: You have a new space in New York (Long Island City). Your pedals are still made in the USA, with a part of the process that is outsourced. Is this still accurate? Was there ever any temptation to move everything offshore? Or do you think we're starting to see a shift with higher tech manufacturing coming back to the US?

MM: Circuit boards are often made overseas. Different parts are sometimes purchased elsewhere. But everything is assembled here in New York. Still, we have removed the *Made in USA* label. I didn't want to run afoul with the Commerce department, or whomever, about what percentage of our final product is really made here in the US, so it just seemed easier to avoid these hassles in the first place. We're in a global

economy now; we can either embrace that, or pretend that it doesn't exist.

What I find works best for us is to have some things coming from other suppliers. But then everything is assembled here, tested here, and I have the final quality control of everything here on site, instead of having it made elsewhere. That will never change.



TRW: What's next for EHX? Anything that will be completely different? Perhaps moving into the amp business? Seems like there's a demand for smaller, lower powered tube amps that could use the EHX touch. Or is there something that can beat the tube amp eventually?

MM: Actually, we are already looking into amps. Smaller tube amps is one possibility – the demand is there, and I think there are needs not being met. But what we'll probably focus on are quality solid state amps. They cost less, are easier to ship, and they sound good if done right.





TRW: When will you retire Mike, if there is such a thing?

MM: No plans on retiring, but at some point I do need to find someone to run the company. I have over 90 employees, and we've become a pretty big company for this small little industry we're in. But at some point, I'll need someone to run the day to day operations. I'd like to hire someone who is both strong in business and engineering, but they have to understand music too.

TRW: Tell me something no one else knows about you.

MM: I think most people think of me as this mad scientist, or a musical oddity of sorts. But what really motivates me is business. I like the business aspect of EHX as well as the musical side of it. You've got to be able to make products that make you money, especially living and working in New York. I love the competitive nature of business, and love to make and sell products that musicians will embrace, while making money. That, to me, is why I still do this.

