



INNOVATION. AMPLIFIED.™

Chapter 1

How All This Came About

by
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In the late '60s, I attended a NAMM show at the Chicago Conrad Hilton Hotel. In those days, the various companies rented a room (or a suite) to display their goods. While I was walking the halls of the hotel, I came into a room where a guy was playing one of those cheap Japanese guitars of that time that had a Formica top and four pickups. This was plugged into some cheesy no-name amplifier and I remember being shocked that this lousy guitar and that cheesy amp sounded so good. I stood and listened for awhile and I noticed that there was this guy standing there with long hair and coveralls. He might not have looked too out-of-place in Mississippi, but at the Conrad Hilton, he stood out. He was explaining to the executives of the company how his little box gave the amp more power. He was selling these boxes out of a bag he had strapped around his neck. It was the first time I'd seen Mike Matthews and encountered his little effects box that he called the "LPB-1 Power Booster"... Mike indicated that he was selling these power boosters, and after he stopped talking with the people in the room, I asked him how much he wanted for one of his boxes. He replied "\$8.00," and I bought one on the spot.

His box was made out of stainless steel and had a phone plug on one side and a jack on the other. The box was a "clamshell" with the halves attached with small Phillips screws. Since I had driven to Chicago, I had no tools to take it apart, but I remembered that the fingernail clippers in my shaving kit had a small fingernail file attached that would probably suffice to take out the screws. Rushing back to my room, I proceeded to disassemble this unit only to find a 9-volt battery and a single transistor with three or four parts attached. I immediately sketched out the schematic and realized this was nothing more than a small "common emitter" preamp... I had been amazed how much difference this box had made in the sound of that cheap guitar and that cheesy amplifier. It really was amazing, and even more surprising was its simplicity. While driving back to Mississippi from Chicago, I realized that my amps (and most others) already had an "extra" preamp. Since Matthews had merely constructed an outboard preamp, I reasoned that it should be fairly simple to incorporate a "patching system" whereby the output of one preamp could be patched into the input of the other channel. We introduced this feature on our VTA-400 in 1970. I took great pride in demoing this because the sound created by cascading the two channels of a 200-watt tube amp was astounding! Apparently others were also impressed by our VTA-400, because the year after we introduced this, a West Coast amp company (Acoustic Control) did the same thing, but improved on my idea by making the cascading of the two onboard channels "footswitchable," which is something I should have thought of, but didn't.

Mike Matthews should be rightfully credited for starting this whole idea of "overdriving" amplifiers. I got the idea from him, but dispensed with the necessity of his external preamp, then Acoustic improved on my idea by making it footswitchable, and thus the era of "overdrive" in guitar amps was born. In every sense of the word, Mike Matthews and his LPB-1 started the overdrive ball rolling. Today, Mike is one of the foremost suppliers of quality vacuum tubes to music and hi-fi tube amp manufacturers.