

ARACOM Amplifiers

by WARD MEEKER

Jeff Aragaki was born and raised in Northern California's Silicon Valley, holds a degree in electronics, spent 25 years working in high-tech companies, doing everything from manufacturing to customer service, systems engineering, sales, and marketing. By 1997 he was ready for a change, and used his experience to found ARACOM Amplifiers.

"I've been involved with electronics and high-tech my entire life," he recalled. "I developed a knack for electronics at an early age and would take apart electronic equipment to see how it worked."

Aragaki was 12 when he bought his first electric guitar, a used Epiphone Crestwood. "I'm fortunate to have kept it, along with most of the guitars I've purchased through the years," he said. That guitar, and the music of the day, played a major role in his current vocation.

"My teen years were spent listening to '60s and '70s rock music. I was inspired by the raw tone of blues-based rock bands from that era, and the first new amplifier I purchased was a late-'70s Marshall JMP 100-watt head," he said. "I've since gathered a collection of vintage guitars and amplifiers, including '60s JTMs and plexis, and a few '50s Les Pauls."

He acknowledges that playing through vintage guitars and amplifiers has helped him develop an ear for tone. "I use my collection of amps as tone references, and use vintage guitars to test the tone of the amps I build," he said.

And though ARACOM began life as a diversified electronics manufacturer,

Aragaki shifted its focus based on his longtime passion for tube amplifiers. "I began repairing and hot-rodding amps in my small home workshop," he recalled. "That led to building amps for myself and a few friends, which then led to finding a larger workshop."



More recently, his affinity for things vintage has extended to a newfound hobby. "I've always been involved with '60s and '70s muscle cars," he said. "And I recently began building and racing them. So I now enjoy hot-rodding cars and amplifiers. They both involve conceptualizing, design, prototyping, testing, and tweaking... but with amps you don't have to get your hands greasy!"

What was your first production amp?

Our initial line was the Tribute series, which are re-creations of '60s Marshall amps. They replicate that tone and were developed by sonic testing them against our collection of original vintage amps.

When did you begin to expand the line?

Nearly immediately, primarily due to customer requests. Our first built-in effect was the long-delay Accutronics

reverb tank, which added a new dimension to the classic British tone. Then, customers started asking us to modify their amps. They liked the vintage tone, but asked for more switching and tonal capabilities.

Our business was doing quite well, regionally, then a couple of years ago we began advertising in *Vintage Guitar*, which has proven excellent for giving us national exposure. VG and our website are our main means



The ARACOM Custom 45R

of advertising.

What do you think makes ARACOM amps stand out?

First, we're an established company, so customers deal with someone who has had professional training, a degree in electronics, and the experience I've gained working in the hi-tech industry. Being a small company, we are a custom shop. We listen to requests when building an amplifier, and all of our head cabs, as well as some of our smaller combo cabs, are made in-house, which gives us the ability to customize a cabinet.

Learning from practices used by hi-tech companies, all of our amps are built as prototypes and tested by guitarists before going into production. This ensures the designs are proven and the tone and features are what we expect. We do not incorporate features for the sake of having more features – some end at the prototype stage because they're detrimental to the tone.

How about other key components, like transformers?

We do not use off-the-shelf transformers unless the customer wants one. Ours are custom-wound and we've done a lot of R&D with them to achieve our performance and tonal qualities.

And you use a couple other tricks, right?

Yes. We've experimented with Variacs and power scaling. However, I've found that half-power B+ voltage switching, along with a PPI Master Volume control, provides excellent control of the overall volume while maintaining tone. So, all of our amps are available with the half-power voltage switch and a Master Volume. Some competitors use the pentode/triode switching to lower wattage, but we've found that to be detrimental to tone, unlike the B+ voltage technique.

Beyond tone, what benefits do your amps derive from that sort of detail?

Well, they've helped us create a versatile line. For example, the channel-switching with automatic Master Volume control is especially useful for live performances. Channel One is set with the Master Volume completely bypassed, allowing for maximum clean headroom. When the amp is switched to Channel Two, the Master Volume is automatically activated. This allows for the volume of the "cranked" tone to be set at the appropriate level compared to the clean-channel volume. While that sort of switching is common in modern high-gain amps, it's not so common in a boutique amp. And we strive to make sure the features are non-intrusive to the vintage-inspired design and tone. In most cases, you can flick a switch or two to get back to the original circuit.



Jeff Aragaki



When did you hire your first employee?

I still do all of the design and wiring myself. About a year ago, I brought someone in to help with the mechanical end of production, and as we grow we'll add people. I rely heavily on guitarists for assistance testing prototypes and amps, especially Gene Baker and Pat Curtis. Gene is the founder of Baker Guitars. There's also Jeff Nunes, who has toured the U.S. a few times using our amps, and John Garcia, who is remarkable blues guitarist. Both provide honest feedback on the tone and performance of our amps.

Any thoughts on what the future might hold for the boutique-amp industry?

Well, I think it will continue to flourish. One reason is the fact that a lot of guitarists do not want a "me too!" mass-production amplifier, and they're turning to boutique amp companies. This has long been true for the pedal industry, where mass-production is not always king.

But I expect that there will continue to be innovated concepts and products developed by boutique amplifier companies, since they're striving to differentiate themselves from the mainstream.

Another reason I think the industry will flourish is the fact that in most cases you can actually talk to the person building the product, discuss options, and tailor the amplifier to suit your needs.

What are your goals for ARACOM?

I'll continue to listen to our customers, since I believe they know best what tone and features should be incorporated. I also have a very long list of new ideas that I'll be prototyping. Those that prove successful will be incorporated into our amplifiers. VG