

Smith Custom Amplifiers

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SAMMY SMITH will be the first to tell you that his company, Smith Custom Amplifiers, came out of a fortuitous set of circumstances beginning just two years ago.

"I grew up playing Silvertone and Fender amps, and after many years of playing modern amps, decided to return to my roots," Smith says. "With the increased costs of vintage amps, I set out to build an amp with the feel of early amps, but with modern twists and a lower price. Simply put, I was looking for a sound that I couldn't find in current production amps."

We recently chatted with Smith

about his amp-building operation.

Vintage Guitar: When did you get started building amps? And did you do it as a hobby, or was it more like a part-time gig?

Sammy Smith: I started by building an amplifier for myself. In terms of production amps, I got started after a chance meeting with [Allman Brothers guitarist] Derek Trucks (VG, October '02), who decided he wanted one like mine, I realized I was on to something. I decided that if pro-level players were interested, it was worth pursuing. The following week, I went on vacation

and took the amp to Jubilee Music, a store in South Alabama, and they were knocked out. They became my first dealer, and sold 10 amps in six weeks.

What was your first model?

The first amps were combos in a 4x10 configuration. The original cabinet is offered with 2x12s or 1x15, and include a smaller cabinet with basically any speaker combination. And it's expanding as we speak. I'm working on a higher-gain model for those who prefer a classic British sound – the prototype is about ready, so hopefully production models could be available as early as January '05.

Anyway, I started taking my first prototype to every concert I could, tracking

down pro players, to see what they thought. A lot of guys would ask for different speaker combinations or different colors, so this has not only been the way for me to get feedback, but also a great way to advertise and meet some amazing guitarists.

What do they like about it?

It's an all-tube amp, it sounds really good. From pristine clean to tweedy crunch, this is the sound I've been looking for since I first picked up a guitar. Besides being assertive and punchy, the amp is dead quiet, even at higher gain settings, making it ideal for mic'ing onstage and recording.

Second, the construction, from its hand-wired, point-to-point electronics to its unique cosmetics, is vastly superior to most mass-produced amplifiers, especially in its price range. All of the cabinets, stainless-steel chassis, and wiring are done in-house. I strive to build an amp that is both roadworthy and attractive, without making any concessions in sound quality.

Finally, the amp is affordable for the average working musician or player concerned about taking his vintage amp on the road. They can have a great-sounding, lightweight, durable amp that will do the job.

How many people do you employ?

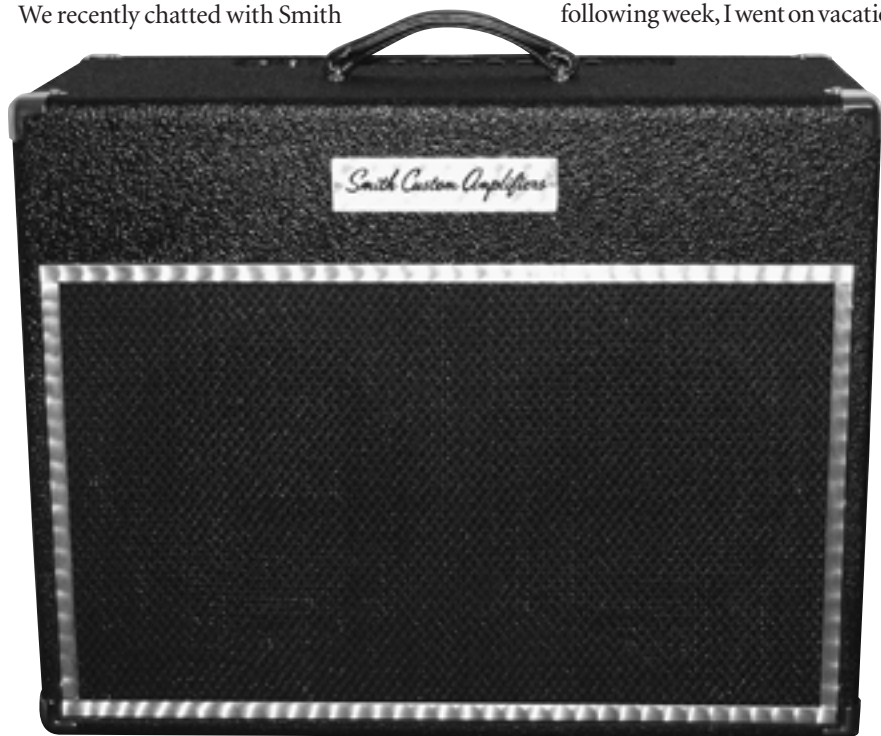
While I have several people that help me with R&D, the only full-time employee is me.

What are your hopes for the future of the guitar/amp industry?

I'd like to see the vintage and boutique market continue to flourish, and some of the little guys get some recognition. As with guitar players, there are a lot of builders who just can't get exposure, and thanks to VG, that's changing every month.

What are your goals for your own business?

My goals are simple. I want to make a living at something that I really enjoy. I want to continue with the current models and develop the new amp design, and I have some great ideas for a guitar line in the future. I would like also to add more dealers, continue to interest pro players, and be in a position to be at the Summer NAMM show as a vendor. ♪



Photos courtesy of Sammy Smith.