

## TECH NOTE #106 Tone.....a few stories

Creating a distinctive guitar TONE, as with any creative endeavor, is in the eye (or ear) of the creator and the beholder. What sounds wonderful to one person may be “nails on a chalkboard” to another. Who is right? Which TONE is better? Neither is right, of course. Who is to say what is good tone or bad tone? Everyone hears things differently. Everyone has a preconceived idea of what they personally like to hear.

We were recently demonstrating some particularly brutal sounds with an Egnater Armageddon head. The comment from a few of our more classic rock oriented friends suggested we don't quit our day jobs. Unfortunately, it is a little late for that! The point is that while what we heard was an incredibly monstrous tone, our friends heard John Deere farm machinery. It's a matter of your perspective. Neither is correct because each person clearly has their own ideas of “good tone”

We receive calls and emails constantly from players seeking our suggestions. We try our best to help. Here are a few of what we consider well-intentioned but somewhat misguided ideas. Hoping we don't offend anyone but these examples are simply questions or comments we often hear.

“I use my standard settings but my amp sounds too dark or muddy”. The first point of confusion for us is what are “standard settings”? I understand that when many players first approach an amp for the first time, it is not uncommon to set all the tone controls at 12:00. Maybe that would be standard settings? If you were to plug into an amp with everything set to 12:00, and the amp sounded too dark or bright or too distorted for your taste, what would you do?

- 1) Walk away because the amp is useless?
- 2) Try a different guitar or speaker?
- 3) Consider that maybe the tubes are bad because, as we all know, amp makers always use the crappiest tubes to increase profits.
- 4) Turn the knobs to see what happens?

I believe “4”) would be the correct answer. There is a saying in the audio business that applies here. “Mix with your ears, not with your eyes”. I recall a player saying their amp was too dark sounding and asked if we could modify it to be brighter. When asked where they had the knobs set, their response was “everything is at noon”. While we were on the phone, I suggested they turn the Treble knob up to see what happens. Their response was “THAT'S IT!!, it sounds great now”. I'm not kidding, this really happens more times than you imagine.

This is a variation of #1. We also get this comment quite often. “My overdrive channel sounds different than the clean channel when I set the knobs the same”. Most multi-channel amps tend to have the clean channels brighter than the overdrive channels so that..... a) The clean channel sounds nicer and b) The overdrive does not sound shrill or ice-picky. I revert back to the explanation above “mix with your ears, not your eyes”. Turn the knobs to see if your sound is there.

“My overdrive sound is too compressed”. In many Master volume type amps, the compression or squishiness can be the result of many interactive components of your sound. One is simply using too much gain/distortion. The GAIN or DRIVE control on your amp typically controls how much of your guitar sound is jammed into the consecutive stages (tubes) in your preamp. Simply turning down the GAIN knob will often reduce the compression without hurting sustain. Another factor is how loud you play. The trends today are smaller, lighter and lower power. If you have a small, low power amp and are trying to keep up with the band, once you use up that power, the amp will not go any louder. All that will happen is your sound will be even more squished and, if you continue to increase the volume setting, when you stop playing you will most likely experience feedback (squealing) and a ton of noise because the amp is cranked up so loud. This is often the drawback of attempting to use very low power amps in a live situation. You may wish to refer to our Technote 101 for a little more information.

I once spoke to a player who said no matter what he did, he could not get his sound to cut through with the band. He had tried a number of options, tubes, speakers, etc. with no luck. It was also a little

strange that no matter what amp he used, he had the same problem. Eventually I did get to examine his "rig" in the problem situation. Not to my surprise, he had the treble and bass full up and the midrange off on his very high gain setting. The sound was huge with tons of low end and a very "crisp" high end. Unfortunately, the tone was so "scooped out", there was no midrange to cut through. When asked why he had the midrange off, his response was "I hate midrange". I pointed out that the midrange is the part of your tone that allows you to be heard through the mix. Reluctantly, he turned the midrange up and.....like magic....he suddenly could be heard. He also found that not only could the audience hear him better; he could hear himself much clearer on stage. What works on a recording will not always translate well in a live situation.

The purpose of this writing, and all of our Technotes, is to help educate and make you aware of some of the problems you, and other guitars may run into.