

REVIVING A LEGENDARY BRAND

Supro, one of the pioneers of the electric guitar, is back with a new line of guitars and amps that pay homage to the classic designs of the 1950s and 1960s. The next big thing?

In 1968, Jimmy Page took a Supro amp into the studio to record the first Led Zeppelin album. Ever since, generations of guitarists have labored long and hard to reproduce the signature tone that defines one of the most influential albums of all time. Their efforts were unfortunately hampered by a nearly insurmountable problem: Supro amps were all but impossible to find. The same year Led Zeppelin made its debut, Valco Manufacturing, the company that produced Supro guitars and amps, went bust, and the line disappeared from the market. A cult-like following continued to collect vintage Supro gear, but those not willing to scrounge around pawn shops or pay premium vintage market prices on eBay were out of luck.

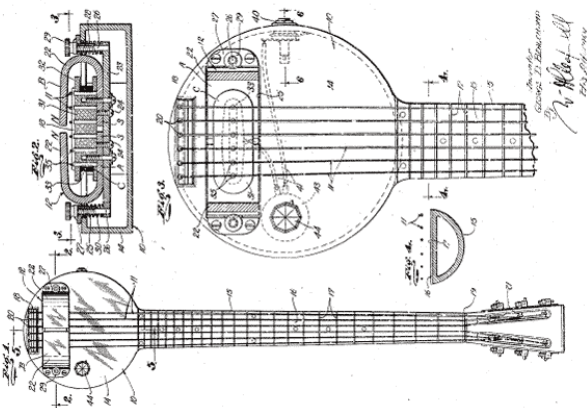
Three years ago, Absara Audio's David Koltai and Brian Bethke set out to solve the problem, reintroducing faithful copies of the 1964 "Blue Rhino" Supro tube amp line. Building on that success, at this year's NAMM show, Absara Audio will reintroduce an updated line of Supro guitars, based on a range of the best-selling Supro models of the 1960s. The new Supro Americana series evokes the company's revolutionary semi-hollow "reso-glass" instruments of the 1960s, which mated a chambered wood body with a molded fiberglass top. The premium Island Series models are high-performance set-neck guitars based on the solid-body Ozark guitar from 1962, which itself was an evolution of the '50s Supro guitar model favored by a young Jimi Hendrix. Both series of instruments are distinguished by sleek art deco styling, and what Koltai describes as the "unmistakable Supro sound" that is largely derived from the instruments' unique construction and period-correct electronics.

Koltai says of the new Supro guitars, "They bring something to the market without any equivalent. Supro guitars have an old school flavor that has been made new again and nothing else looks or sounds like them. The Supro guitar represents an alter-



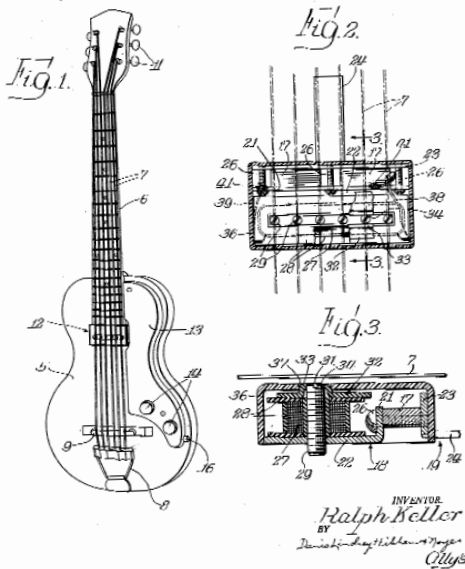
The Supro Island and Americana series will debut at NAMM. With a total of 21 models, the guitars blend Supro's unique tone and cosmetics with contemporary playability and stability.

2,089,171
G. D. BEAUCHAMP
ELECTRICAL STRINGED MUSICAL INSTRUMENT
Filed June 2, 1934
3 Sheets-Sheet 1
Aug. 10, 1937.



George Beauchamp, an original partner, patented the electromagnetic pickup used in virtually every electric guitar today. He later handed it off to Rickenbacker, which put it into production

July 13, 1954 R. KELLER 2,683,388
PICKUP DEVICE FOR STRINGED INSTRUMENTS
Filed April 12, 1952



Supro's patented Vistatone Pick-up, used in David Bowie's guitar below, was cited by Seth Lover as "prior art" when he filed a patent for the famed Gibson humbucker.



David Bowie was one of a long line of musicians who embraced the unique tone and cosmetics of the Supro guitar.

native electric guitar with deep American roots that reach all the way back to the time when rhythm & blues music met country music and rock 'n' roll was born." In addition to opening new creative horizons for today's players, this unique American legacy and distinctive tonal quality also creates opportunity for retailers. "I'd argue that Supro guitars will create sales that would not have happened otherwise," he says. "It's a lot easier to excite a player who already owns a Fender or a Gibson to buy a Supro as a means of achieving a new sound rather than trying to convince them to buy yet another variation on the Telecaster or Les Paul."

Electric guitars can generally be placed in either the bolt-on neck, single-coil pickup "Fender" category, or the set-neck humbucker "Gibson" category. Supro guitars are a notable exception, employing different materials, unique components, and unorthodox construction methods. This "differentness" made the task of developing reissues particularly challenging. Among the network of OEM guitar component suppliers and manufacturers, none was tooled up to produce a Supro-styled guitar. Complicating matters, most of the original engineering drawings and documentation were long gone.

VINTAGE TONE, MODERN PLAYABILITY

Undeterred, Koltai and Bethke began acquiring vintage Supro instruments, meticulously reverse engineering the construction techniques and passive electronics to re-create the unique tonal qualities of the original Supro guitars. After several rounds of initial prototyping, they recruited veteran guitar designer Trev Wilkinson to assist in creating new instruments that were unmistakably "Supro," but had the stability and playability of contemporary instruments made by PRS and Fender. Special care was taken to re-create signature Supro components such as the sonically and visually distinctive "Vistatone" pickup, a rather large and overwound, single coil that was actually cited by Seth Lover as "prior art" in his famous patent for the Gibson PAF. In addition to seeking guidance from Trev Wilkinson and vintage pickup historian Ken Calvet, Koltai owes a special debt of gratitude to the leaders of several major guitar companies. "Upon hearing what we were trying to do," he says, "mentors like Michael Ciravolo and Steve Pisani were incredibly generous, introducing us to potential manufacturers and component suppliers as well as providing advice on how to navigate the politics of the guitar retail environment."

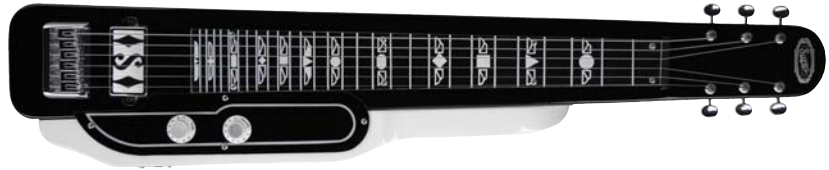
The Supro reissue project is an outgrowth of Koltai and Bethke's Pigtronix boutique effects pedal business, launched in 2004. Based in Long Island, New York, the effects manufacturer has thrived by offering high-end pedals that have effectively introduced analog synthesizer concepts to the stompbox market as well as innovative digital products such as the award-winning Infinity Looper. Pigtronix has always pushed the technological envelope with a futuristic agenda, while Supro draws heavily on the past. Yet, Koltai says the success of both brands is based on the same underlying principle: Finding unoccupied niches in a crowded marketplace. "As head of sales and product development for Absara Audio, I've repeatedly been able to spot opportunities within the m.i. market," he explains. "In their own individual way, the products offered by both Pigtronix and Supro have no direct competition. They are sonically and functionally unique."

Koltai first began paying attention to Supro while sharing a booth at the 2010 NAMM show with Bruce Zinky, who owned the brand at the time. Zinky had developed a reputation as an amp guru, for his work designing Fender's Custom shop tube amps in the '90s including their flagship Vibro King amplifier, which remains in production today. "I was amazed at the cult following and exalted status that vintage Supro amps had among top musicians and producers," says Koltai. The brand clearly had a mystique about it that had survived nearly 50 years of dormancy." In 2011, when Zinky decided to skip the NAMM show, Koltai jumped at the opportunity to sell Supro amps for him on a commission basis. The next year, Zinky decided to sell the Supro brand, and recruited Koltai to find a buyer.

DETAILS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Koltai and Bethke courted several potential buyers in an initial effort to sell the brand for Zinky. But, as they dug into the history of Supro and realized the untapped potential of the brand, they came to the conclusion that they were the ideal purchasers. Sammy Ash of Sam Ash Music strengthened their conviction. "With vintage Supro amps regularly selling on eBay for upwards of \$2,000, the romance of bringing back a long-lost American legend was clearly a profitable opportunity as well as a compelling mission from a musical and cultural standpoint," says Koltai. "Sammy said to us that if we could deliver a Supro for \$1,000, he'd immediately put them in all his stores. That sealed it for us. Supro was the only brand left from the early days of rock 'n' roll that hadn't been turned into a big business. It was clear to me that we would never have an opportunity like this again. Fortunately, the success of our pedals paved the way for us to acquire Supro, take \$1 million in pre-orders, and deliver within six months of our 2014 debut at Winter NAMM."

Although Koltai and Bethke planned from the beginning to reintroduce both Supro guitars and amps, they tackled the amp line first. Sticklers for authenticity, they set out to build faithful replicas. They sourced a reproduction of Supro's distinctive "Blue Rhino" Tolex covering; they worked with Eminence to develop



The new Supro line even includes reissues of classic lap steel models.

a U.S.-made driver that captured the magic of the original Jensen speakers; and they meticulously re-created the sounds of the original Supro transformers and signature Class A power amp. The resulting line of amps has found some discerning fans. Joe Perry of Aerosmith has been touring with the Supro Thunderbolt Reissue ever since it was released. Robert Smith of the Cure used a pair of Supro Black Magick amps throughout the band's 2016 world tour. Numerous Supro amps have also been seen on stage with Paul Simon's band over the past two years, and the reissues can be heard throughout his 2016 masterpiece album *Stranger to Stranger*. Vintage Supro amps also remain in service with Brian Setzer, Stone Gossert of Pearl Jam, and the Rolling Stones, who gave Supro a cameo as seen in their *Blue and Lonesome* studio video. The line got an added boost in 2015 when KMC Music signed on as the U.S. distributor for Supro.

Koltai says that the current lineup of Supro amps and guitars is just the beginning. Numerous other models from the original company's expansive catalog are ripe for reissue, and the untapped demand is enormous. He says, "Supro contributed to the sound of rock 'n' roll from the very beginning, and it has a backstory that pre-dates Fender, Gibson, and Marshall." He's understandably enthusiastic about his new offering of guitars, but the boasts of Supro's role in shaping contemporary music are no exaggeration: the company can arguably lay claim to having invented the modern electric guitar, not to mention the resonator guitar, as well as the reverb amp. Directly and indirectly, Supro and its corporate antecedents have had an influence on every guitar maker in the country.

THE FIRST REALLY LOUD GUITAR

The Supro story traces back to Los Angeles in the early 1920s. Big bands were

in vogue, and George Beauchamp, a local guitarist, was tired of getting drowned out by the horn section. In frustration, he began discussing the need for a louder guitar with John Dopyera, a Czech immigrant who ran an instrument repair shop. Dopyera was sufficiently intrigued that he began trying to find a solution. Inspired by the resonator head of a banjo, he inserted a spun metal cone inside an acoustic guitar and attached it to the bridge, creating the first resonator guitar. There was enough interest in the prototypes that in 1925, he partnered with Beauchamp to launch the National Stringed Instrument Company. Within a year, the company employed 30 and was producing close to 50 resonators a week. Gibson management was sufficiently impressed with the resonator that Guy Hart, president, offered to buy the company.

Demand for the new resonator guitars was brisk, but Beauchamp began experimenting with using electricity to make guitars even louder. His tinkering sparked a heated debate that upended the company. Dopyera argued that electrified guitars were ridiculous and that Beauchamp's experiments were a waste of corporate assets. Beauchamp countered that an electro-magnetic guitar pickup had unlimited potential. The arguments escalated until 1927, when Dopyera stormed out, taking his four brothers with him to launch the competing Dobro Company. (The Dobro name was an abbreviation of Dopyera Brothers; it also is the Czech word for good.)

Dobro and National filed suits and counter suits, sapping the resources of both companies. In 1931, a frustrated Beauchamp quit National and enlisted Adolph Rickenbacker to build his new "electric guitar." Previously, Rickenbacker's machine shop had made the metal cones and guitar bodies for both National and Dobro. In 1935, using Beauchamp's patented pickup, Rickenbacker introduced what many say was the

first commercially available electric guitar, a lap steel dubbed “The Frying Pan.”

VICTIM OF TOO MUCH SUCCESS

National and Dobro both fell on hard times during the Depression, and to avoid bankruptcy, the Dopyeras merged the companies, creating National Dobro. In 1935, Louis Dopyera, along with employees Vic Smith and Al Frost, took control of the business, renaming it Valco Manufacturing. Like Beauchamp, their goal was to harness the hot new technology of the day—electricity—to redefine the guitar. Products bearing Valco’s in-house flagship “Supro” brand name—and its distinctive lightning bolt logo—appear at this crossroads, as early as 1935. In 1936, they relocated the business from sunny Los Angeles to Chicago, during the coldest winter of the century. They braved the harsh elements to get closer to electronic component makers who were supplying their amp business, and to the country’s leading musical instrument distributors, who sold Valco-made products.

A steady stream of innovative products made Valco a major factor in the guitar market in the 1950s. The company was the first to incorporate a reverb unit in a guitar amp, the first to mix piezo and magnetic pickups, and the first to embrace alternative materials, resulting in the famous reso-glas guitars that Absara Audio has now reissued. Valco marketed products under its own Supro label, but also produced distinctive guitars, lap steels and amps on an OEM basis under the National, Airline, Oahu, and Gretsch brands.

The folk boom of the 1950s, followed by rock ‘n’ roll, and then “Beatlemania” transformed the guitar market from a small niche into the industry’s fastest-growing segment. Between 1950 and 1964, guitar sales rose eight-fold from 300,000 units to 1.5 million. This torrid growth unfortunately planted the seeds for Valco and Supros demise. In 1966, Robert Engelhardt, who had taken over at Valco from the original three partners, borrowed heavily to acquire the much larger Kay Guitar Company. He reasoned that combining the two companies

would create an undisputed industry leader. What he didn’t fully appreciate was that Kay had serious internal problems. To meet the growing demand, the company had borrowed heavily to build a new plant, and was struggling with acute quality problems. Within a year, the combined company was in liquidation and the Supro brand vanished.

Can an abandoned brand be successfully returned to its previous status? Koltai answers with an emphatic yes, citing the Vox amp line as a case study. In 1965, as the amp preferred by the Beatles, Vox ranked as one of the industry’s hottest product lines. Four years later, due to a series of managerial missteps, it was effectively off the market, supplanted by Marshall as the definitive “English” amp. Vox has since been successfully revived, and Koltai envisions a similar scenario for Supro. He concludes, “The history is all there. We don’t have to make anything up.”

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