

Gabriel Sound Garage

Gabriel Sound Garage officially opened its doors in late 2004, but founder Gabriel C. Bucataru was into amp building as a hobby long before that. • “For three years, I was the site administrator of 18watt.com, an internet forum for do-it-yourself amp builders. After a few years of building my own amps, and by virtue of the construction details I posted online, I began to get requests. Demand was such that it justified starting up Gabriel Sound Garage.

“Initially, I built amps in my spare time, working in my basement. But after a short time, I ran out of ‘spare’ time,” Bucataru recently told VG, laughing. “Orders just kept growing, and I had to cut the number of hours I worked at my day job.”

By the fall of 2005, Bucataru experienced that rare feeling of bliss that comes with escaping the 9-to-5 rush, when he opted to build amps on a full-time basis.

Vintage Guitar: So, were you focused on one model early on, or did you offer more?

Gabriel Bucataru: I started out building a re-creation of the legendary Marshall 18-watt model 1974 combo. It's hard to believe that you can build a company with just a single model, but it was – and is – a very successful product for me. It also helped having the army of experts at 18watt.com to stretch the possibilities of this amazing EL84 amp. Encouraged by the response and feedback I got from friends and customers, I started several variations of the 18-watt circuit, including our LowCarb 18.

Was there a point where business began to noticeably expand?

It started really picking up when I got orders from professional players like the Colin John Band, and then endorsements from major bands like MercyMe, The Afters, and others. Having feedback from such high-caliber players spurred me to build new models like the Voxer 18, which is a hybrid 18-watt amp with an EF86 pentode channel similar to the Vox AC15, and a normal channel.

This past Spring, we made our first public appearance at the Chicago Guitar Show. That was a great opportunity to reach players who were not familiar with us, and helped me develop some key contacts in the business.

As you see it, what sets your amps apart in the hectic boutique market?

I marry an old concept with a new, hip spirit – without compromising either. In other words, we wed classic tone with a modern look; people know me as “the guy with the yellow-and-black cabinets” – the bumblebee amps. I always thought an amp should be visible on a dimly-lit stage, and I believe each amp has its own character or personality, even though it belongs to the same EL84 class-A/B family.

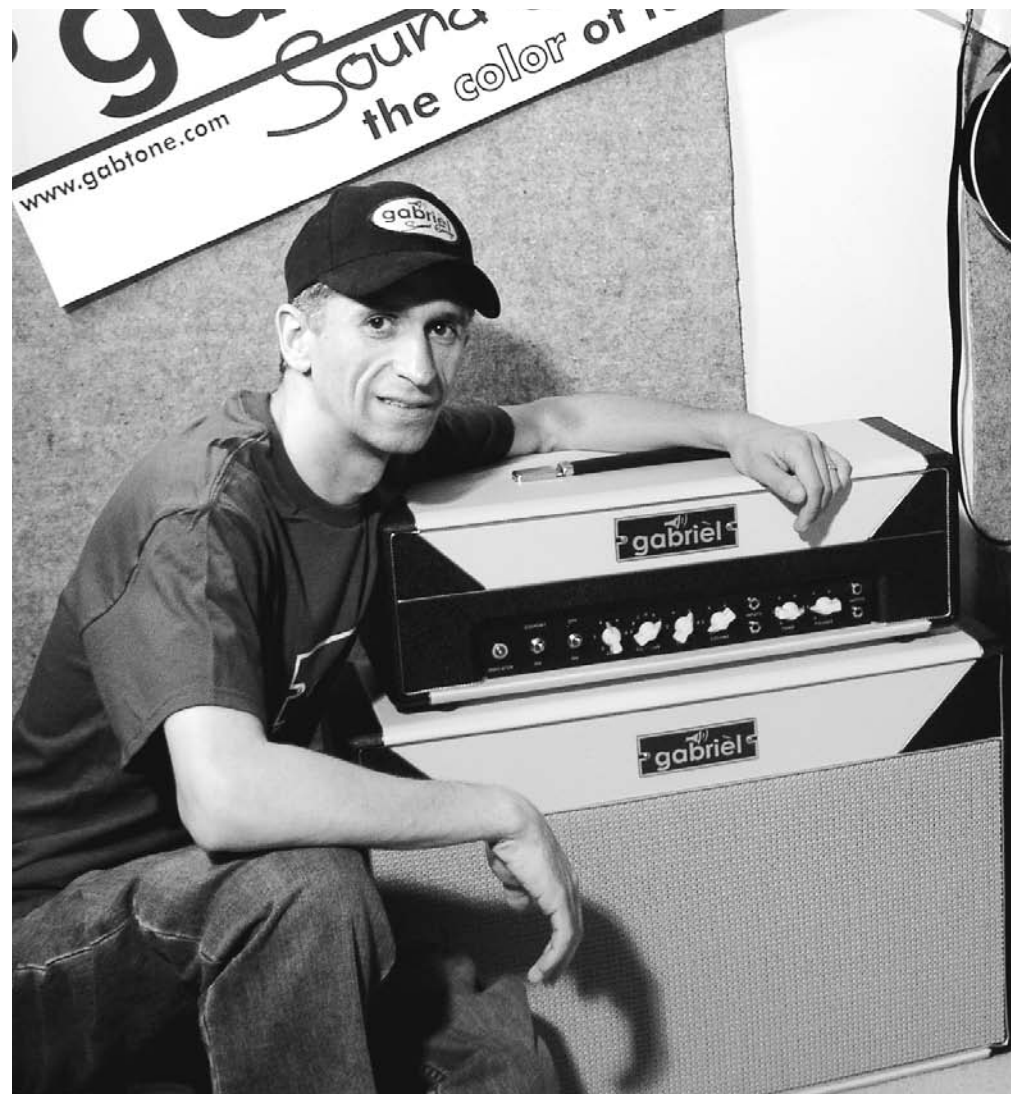
Our focus is 18-watt British tone, with all of its intricacy. But I think the possibilities are endless when you start experimenting with new amp breeds. It is all comes down to voicing to create, or re-create, a coveted tone. That means using premium components, tube-matching, chassis burn-in,

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Gabriel Bucataru with one of his 18-watt amps.

and testing.

Have you yet reached the point of hiring help in the shop?

Right now, I handle all assembly. I'm not sure how long this will be possible, but it does wonders for quality and consistency (laughs)! To keep things flowing, we have major components such as chassis, transformers, and cabinets made to our specs. If our growth continues as it has been, I will certainly need to find an amphead or two – someone who shares my passion and obsession with de-

tail. Right now I'm juggling the hats of amp builder, web designer, and accountant. It keeps me busy, but it's fun.

What do you hope the future holds for boutique amp builders like yourself?

I hope that small builders gain more recognition, along with the big guys. There are extremely gifted builders who are happy to stay “small” and will not compromise or trade quality for quantity. There's a certain magic about being able to call up a builder and discuss details of construction. Once a company grows past a certain point, that intimacy becomes lost, and other dynamics come into the equation.

And what are your plans for Gabriel Sound Garage?

Well, I definitely want to preserve the small-business charm, where customers can feel free to call and chat about the amp they're about to order. And I hope that in several years I'll be able to look back and see a steady and continuous refinement of my amplifiers. It's inevitable that upgrades and new models will come about.

Customers are great at coming up with ideas, and if one listens, he can turn out some amazing amps. I do hope that down the line my amps will continue to be shaped by customers. It would be pitiful if they were shaped only by what I consider good tone. Two pair of ears are always better than one, so I'll always keep one of mine to the ground! 🎸