

AWARD-SESSION IS A WELL-KNOWN MAKER OF AMPS, CABINETS, EFFECTS AND TONE-BOOSTING GUITAR CIRCUITS. MARTYN CASSERLY MEETS STEWART WARD, A MAN WITH A NOVEL IDEA – THAT GREAT SOUND NEEDN'T COST THE EARTH...

# The Sessioneer

**I**t all started when I was 12 years old,' remembers Stewart Ward. 'It was a warm June evening, and my mother and I had just been out for a walk along the seafront of St Helier. Passing by someone's open window I heard this sound, radically different to anything I'd ever heard before. It was *Apache* by The Shadows, and after that, like so many other players now in their 50s, I just wanted to play guitar.'

Stewart's parents – both musicians themselves – ran the local cinema, and when the holiday season ended they would convert it into a youth club one day of the week. Local bands would come and play, and young Stewart would watch them with a keen eye.

'I was raised in this culture of music and bands... so I was doomed from the start!' he laughs. 'For my 13th birthday mum and dad bought me a Hohner

Holborn guitar, costing them 29 guineas. They got it from Bennett's in Portsmouth, and it was delivered by a bus, which took three days to reach us!'

This was followed by his first 'real' guitar; a Burns Artist with three Tri-Sonic pickups that allowed him to get closer to the Hank Marvin sound. Practising hard, he ended up playing in local bands covering Shadows tunes as well as other contemporary hits. Then, in 1962, his father generously offered to buy Stewart his dream guitar.

'It was a brand new pink Fender Strat that cost 169 guineas, and it was wonderful. I used it for years and years after that, and it's still my favourite guitar, if only for sentimental reasons,'

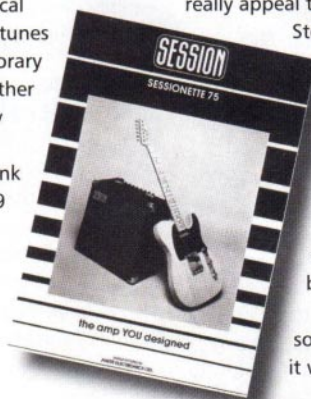
he declares. 'It's a bit battered now, as you'd expect, but there can't be too many '62 Strats out there that have only had one careful owner...'

Mr Ward Senior was no pushover, though, and told Stewart that if he wanted a Vox AC30, then he would have to work to pay for it. This prospect didn't really appeal to a 17-year-old lad, so

Stewart decided to try and build an amp himself.

'I got some parts from Selmer by telling them I was repairing an amp, and used a circuit design based on a Fender Bassman from *The Electric Guitar Amplifier Handbook* by Jack Darr.

'There were a few bugs to sort out at first, but after that it worked fine. I used it for a





Session ready Left to right: a Shads-toned Stockton combo; the first-ever Sessionette combo, dating from 1981; and a rather hush-hush prototype

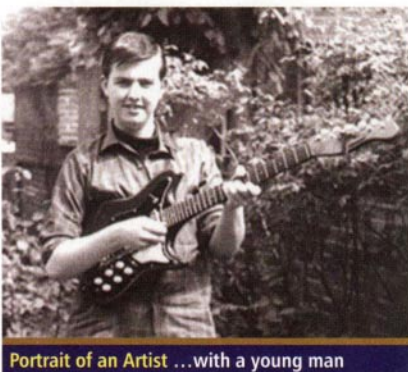
## ‘The 15:30 was maybe 25 years too early. I don’t think the world was ready for a “boutique” amp back then’

while but was never very happy with the range of tones; I knew I could make it better. In fact, even to this day I’m still doing the same thing – always trying to make my amps sound even better.’

Over the next few years Stewart trained as an electronics engineer, while rebuilding amps and refining them in his spare time. Taking the plunge in November 1979 he released his first commercial valve amp, the 15:30, under the brand name Session.

‘It was a very simple amp designed primarily for studio use, with a switchable output between 15W and 30W,’ explains Stewart. ‘It stayed in production for two years, but in hindsight I think it was about 25 years too early. The world wasn’t quite ready for a “boutique” amp back then...’

Stewart Ward set to work designing its successor, this time looking towards the



Portrait of an Artist ...with a young man



In the lab ‘The Sessionette was the first transistor amplifier to really make a mark,’ says Stewart

latest technology to gain inspiration. ‘I noticed that there were some new chips coming out that would allow transistor amps to finally work properly,’ he explains. ‘Up until then the problem was that you could never get a high enough input impedance for the guitar pickups. In fact, early transistor amps had a negative effect on pickups and therefore sounded poor in comparison to valve amps. I designed an amplifier that used all the high-impedance tone circuits and signal paths that valve amps used, but replaced the valves with these new chips, the TLO series from Texas Instruments – TLO71s and 72s.

‘There was a Fender valve amp in my workshop at the time and I decided to use an oscilloscope to measure how it altered the signal as you adjusted the tone controls. I noticed that it put a little “hump” on the waveform; putting my new circuit through the same test showed that, lo and behold, it was exactly the same! That convinced me; the two amps were working in an identical manner. So I set about fine-tuning the circuit, and out of that came the Sessionette amp.’

The solid state Sessionette 75 became Session’s most famous amp, selling 55,000 units between 1981 and 1988 and coming in a variety of options, all of which offered 75W of power.

‘It had channel-switching, it was small, it was loud, and the dealers all told me to bugger off! They wouldn’t touch them,’ Stewart laughs. ‘But when players like Geoff Whitehorn got behind the amp then it was accepted by the public, and after that everything just snowballed. In no time at all I was making 100 a month out of my garage.’

Over the years the user list grew to include many of the top stars of the day, and the Sessionette soon became the pub band’s weapon of choice. ‘In a small way,’ Stewart reflects, ‘and without wanting to sound conceited, I think it was the probably the first transistor amp to really make a mark.’

However, the late ‘80s proved to be a difficult time for Session. A combination of aggressive marketing strategies from larger manufacturers and the stock market crash of ‘87 brought a premature end to the Session name, and the company went into liquidation.

'There was nothing worse than seeing the factory dead,' Stewart recalls sadly. 'All the stock was just sitting there, but we weren't allowed to sell it!'

Session was bought by Tony Morris, who continued to build the amps for a short while before discontinuing the range. Stewart set up a company distributing Midiman products, but the call of amplifiers was too much and he soon returned with the newly-formed Award-Session company.

'After I'd sold the old company the new owners changed some of the specifications on the Session amps, which, in my opinion, harmed the product,' he says. 'I decided to make amps again based on the principles and designs I'd always followed, and called the new company "A Ward Session" to differentiate it from the others.'

Over the last five or six years Award-Session has grown and now offers amps, pedals, cables, electric and acoustic preamps and special tonal mods for Strats. Most recently, his collaboration with guitar builder Steve Field has led to a new venture – the Genus guitar.

'Playing both Teles and Strats for the past 40 years has given me a fair insight into how they could be improved, while still maintaining those classic sounds,' Stewart says. 'It's all about the pickup placement, really; that seems to be the great secret of Fender guitars. For example, the neck pickup on a Strat is about 3mm further away from the neck than, say, a Tele or Les Paul, whose pickups are pretty much exactly where the 24th fret would be. This means that the Strat picks up different harmonics and therefore sounds different.'

### USER LIST

#### ERIC CLAPTON

The Sessionette was reported to be used extensively on his August album

#### MIKE RUTHERFORD

The Genesis guitarist and part-time Mechanic had seven Session amps

#### GEOFF WHITEHORN

Session evangelist and hero, Geoff has also used the original Session 15:30

#### JERRY DONAHUE

Long-time friend of Stewart Ward and Telecaster player extraordinaire

#### TONY HICKS

Hollies guitarist and proud Sessionette fan

#### DAVE STEWART

Now back with the Eurythmics, Dave used his 75 on several albums



Testing time 'Early transistor amps were poor, as are many of today's – they're made cheaply'

## 'I get sick of all the "transistor bashing". In most cases it's not based on fact, just prejudice'

'The Tele bridge pickup is another one: it's angled more than a Strat, and that's why they sound so different. Sure there are other things that effect the sound – wood type, hardware, that sort of thing – but that only accounts for about 20 per cent. The rest – the majority – is made by the pickups and where you put them.'

With this in mind the Genus features a standard three single-coil pickup arrangement, but with spacings and angles intended to bring out the best of Tele and Strat-type sounds in one guitar. Although the tones may be classic, the design itself is definitely modern.

'How the guitar plays, feels and sounds has all come from years of playing, and listening to musicians' comments. The shape is my idea! Why? Well, I've been looking at Strats for 40 years, and I've just become a little tired of them. Now I know that you're not allowed to say things like that, and don't get me wrong – I think Strats are great, and I own several – but you're allowed to get tired of things, aren't you? I mean, people have divorced wives for less! I just think it's nice to see a new shape, and I think plenty of people out there will agree.'

The amp range now includes the Sessionette, the lightweight Sessionette-Century, and the Stockton – an AC30-type amp for classic Shadows sounds. All come with twin channels, plenty of gain, and are fully solid state.

'I get a bit sick of all this transistor amp bashing that goes on in the music community these days,' says Stewart angrily. 'I wouldn't mind if it was based on fact, but in most cases it's just

prejudice; and it's subliminal! You see it all the time in magazines – 'plug your guitar into a good valve amp...' Not a good amp, notice, but a good *va/ve* amp.'

'In the early days transistor amps were pretty poor, and a lot of the ones around now are just the same because they're made cheaply. I remember during the mid '90s taking a very popular tranny amp and testing it in our lab. The manufacturer claimed it was 40W but during our test we found it was only 28W! Plus the speaker magnet was tiny, and you need a big magnet because that's what turns the power into acoustic energy – it drives the whole amp! Tiny magnet... tiny acoustic energy... tiny sound. No wonder people think transistor amps are quiet, when respected manufacturers do things like that!

'I always use high-quality Celestion speakers, and it makes a hell of a difference. There's also a bit of trickery in the circuitry that allows the speaker to vibrate properly; something that transistor amps have struggled with in the past, which has led to them being called cold and lifeless. This circuit allows the amp to sing, and harmonic distortion caused by the speaker resonance to affect the sound – just like a valve amp.'

In a guitar-playing world that is very traditional in its taste, Stewart Ward challenges us to think again about what makes a great guitar or amp sound the way it does. 'Just judge with your ears, not your eyes,' he tells us, 'and I'm sure you'll agree.'

See [www.award-session.com](http://www.award-session.com)

