

By Ward Meeker


**SOMMATONE
AMPLIFIERS**

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Sommatone Amplifiers

AS A GUITAR PLAYER, JIM Somma has never been satisfied with the tone of most production amps. Combine that with his frustration over the lack of expertise he encountered in music stores and repair shops, and Somma was the epitome of a guy who'd "had enough."

"I began to experiment and research, trying to find out how to create the tone I wanted," he said. "I soon discovered that creating good tone is not a mystery—80 percent of a player's tone comes from their hands, the remaining 20 percent is created by

gear that inspires a player to reach the next level."

That remaining 20 percent, Somma says, became his mission.

When you decided to build amps, did you jump in full-time right away?

No, initially it was a part-time venture—more a hobby where I'd work on amps for a few musicians who enjoyed experimenting with their equipment. As our customer base grew, we realized that we were offering something different from other shops, so in 2001 we opened our doors full-time.

Initially, how many models did you offer?

In the beginning, we focused on custom amplification. We did build several one-off amps to customer specs, staying away from replicas and focusing more on original designs. The response was overwhelmingly positive—customers loved the sound and build-quality of our amps. So we decided to develop a single-channel "production" amp that was versatile and touch-sensitive, going from clean to overdriven and everything in between, and fully controllable, clean to dirty, using the

guitar's Volume control. We also wanted to incorporate a usable master volume that would be bypassed when the amp was cranked.

After two years of research and development, we had the Roaring-20, a 20-watt, class A, EL84-powered amp. We scrutinized the layout and lead dress and came up with a reverb circuit that is wired in parallel with the preamp, so it doesn't color the tone in any way.

At what point did your product line begin to expand?

Well, the Roaring-20 was popular because of its suitability for recording and playing small venues. But some customers wanted more power and headroom.

One of the amp's earliest fans, Earl Slick, who is David Bowie's guitarist, encouraged us to develop another model, so the Roaring-40 was born. The two share the same preamp, but the 40 has a quad of EL84s, larger transformers, and a half-power switch that drops its output to 20 watts. And later, we partnered with Earl to make a signature amp—the Slick 18—which is a straight-up class A rock-and-roll machine. No overdrive pedal required—just crank it and go!

What do you think sets your product apart?

Extreme attention to detail. Because we're musicians, we understand the difference between an amp that simply works and one that sounds and plays great. So, every component is chosen for optimum tone and reliability. Our amps use true point-to-point wiring and are built from the ground up;

they're not knockoffs. Our welded aluminum chassis were designed in-house and made to our specs. And, we cater to the player who wants to get the most from their gear.

When did you hire your first employee?

Right away, we hired a really talented tech who works on guitars and amps, and two years ago added another tech. I build all of our amps myself, and our sales rep joined the team this year.

What do you hope to see happen as the market evolves among boutique amp makers?

More and more players are getting hip to the fact that boutique amps are more reliable, sound better, and are more versatile than vintage and replica amps. I'm not saying vintage amps don't sound good, but they were never designed to be played on "10." Most boutique amps are designed to distort, as opposed to the fact that distortion is an inherent design flaw in vintage amps. Crank up a vintage amp and you'll hear howling overtones when you bend strings, most noticeably above the 12th fret. And they're not as quiet in terms of hum and hiss, especially at loud volumes. By using proper power-supply filtering, grounding, and properly balancing preamp distortion and power amp saturation, modern boutique amps can be far superior in tone and reliability.



Sommatone
Roaring-40

The market today is saturated with boutique amp builders, many of whom are simply building massaged amp kits. But being able to read a schematic and use a soldering iron doesn't make you an amp manufacturer! As the saying goes, you get what you pay for; a handmade amp can be cheap or expensive, but the fact that it's built by hand isn't what produces great tone. More players need to become aware of this, and real amp builders need to educate their customers.

What are your goals for Sommatone?

We were founded to help players get the tone they want. And we will continue to grow, continue to design and develop innovative amps, and continue to broaden our customer base. **VG**