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CASE STUDY

Little Walter Amps and ToneSpeak: A Match Made in Tone Heaven

Each Little Walter guitar amp is a labor of love linked to Phil Bradbury's youth.

"It'd been my dream to capture what I had as a kid," says Phil, "I was fortunate to grow up without much money and I would go up to a music store's attic and find old beat-up tweed amps and the tone you got from those things was so magical."

Over the decades, Phil has had lucrative careers in mining and software, but his love for that beautiful tone never left his heart.

"Years later, in my fifties, I bought two over-the-counter amps," says Phil. "They sounded like a speaker in a cardboard box compared to what I grew up on. I did a year's worth of research and found that we had beaten all of the good stuff out of our amps in the interest of making them quicker and cheaper."

That's not Phil's way and in 2008 he started Little Walter, where he builds each amp himself by hand with the finest components he can buy. His tube-driven amps have no circuit, tags, or turret boards. There are no shortcuts to perfect tone. He spends two or three days just on the wiring for each of his amps.

"I'm using signal caps that cost me twenty-eight bucks a cap," says Phil. "A little tiny thumbnail-sized capacitor and I guarantee you, my competitors are using a dollar and a half capacitors. I will not cut to save a buck. I'll quit first."

Achieving A Rainbow of Tone

The quality of a Little Walter amp catches the ear of anyone who hears one.

"I've been very fortunate to work with [Robben Ford](#)," says Phil. Musician magazine named Ford one of the "100 Greatest Guitarists of the 20th Century." He's played with the likes of Miles Davis, Joni Mitchell, George Harrison, and Kiss.

"I met Robben through Vince Gill and we were hanging out in the music store in Nashville," says Phil. "There's nothing Robben can't do with any guitar you hand him. And he starts asking all the right questions about tone and his amp. Vince Gill just waved me over and said, 'You need to speak to this gentleman right here. He can answer your question.'"

They got to talking and soon Robben was using a Little Walter amp. He even made Phil a consultant on his next album, [Pure](#). Later, Robben came back to Phil and said he wanted more from the speakers in his cabinet. The timing was perfect.



Phil Bradbury and Robben Ford



The [ToneSpeak line](#) of premium guitar speakers created by [MISCO](#) had recently come out. [Anthony Lucas](#), who knew Phil well, was a Co-Founder and is Chief Engineer at ToneSpeak. He had sent over sample speakers for Phil to test in Little Walter amps.

"I could not believe it," Phil says about how ToneSpeak's [Austin 1250](#) compared to the high-quality speakers he was already using. "I'm talking 20% to 25% improvement on speakers I was already in love with."

Phil paired an Austin 1250 with a [Manchester 1290](#) from ToneSpeak in a cabinet and brought in Robben to A/B test it against what he was currently using. In Phil's words, Robben "lost his mind" when he heard it in action. Later that same day, Robben brought legendary steel guitarist Paul Franklin by to put the Little Walter with ToneSpeak's speakers in it up against his [Dumble amp](#). Dumble amps were also handmade by one person up until that man passed away in 2022 and now used ones go for as much as \$175,000.

"Robben turned to Paul and said, 'listen to this.' And he played the Dumble and he says that's a big clean, solid bar of tone. But listen, when I go to the Little Walter with the ToneSpeak speakers—I'm getting a rainbow of tone. It's so much wider, so many colors there. There's no competition."



Bass Amps and Neodymium Magnets

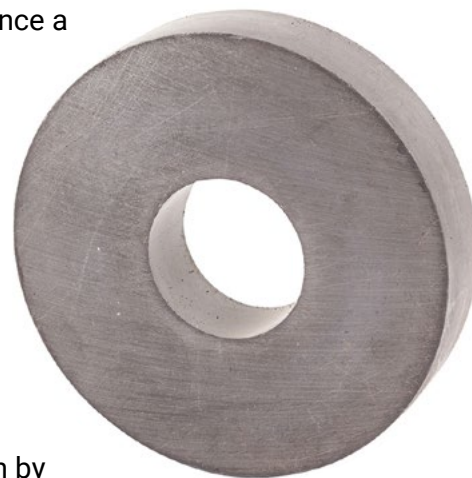
Phil himself is a bass guitarist and still gets together with friends once a week to play.

"I built a bass amp that was good enough to do a backline for Vince Gill at the Ryman Auditorium," says Phil. "But it still didn't give me what I was looking for compared to my guitar and steel guitar amps."

Every guitar speaker needs a [magnet](#). The speakers in Phil's original bass cabinet were being driven by heavy ceramic-ferrite magnets. A common design for a bass amp is to pair a ferrite-driven woofer with a tweeter to achieve a full range of frequencies. Phil thought he'd never switch over to a speaker driven by a neodymium magnet.

"Neo is the strongest magnet for the mass," explains Anthony. "It might take ten times as much mass with a ferrite magnet to get the same strength as you do with a neo one. That's not necessarily good for a guitar because the lower inductance of a smaller magnet can accentuate the highs in the spectrum to a degree that it's beyond what's pleasing for electric or steel guitars and can sound shrill."

However, Anthony spent extensive time engineering new bass guitar speakers for ToneSpeak, believing he could make them superior with a neodymium magnet.



Vince Gill with Sting

"Neo gives you a quicker attack because it's so strong," says Anthony. "What I found with ToneSpeak's new bass guitar [woofers](#) is that the inductance is so low that we're getting enough high end and it's pleasing. It's a better high-end than what a [tweeter](#) would do."

"I was an old dinosaur," jokes Phil. "This young guy comes in and says, 'You got the best bass amp I have ever played but you need to upgrade your speakers.' So, I listened to him for a change and he was right. It changed everything. I'll now put my bass cabs and my bass head up against any brand made in the world and I'll feel very proud about it...Anthony has bent over backwards for me."

ToneSpeak's entire [new line of bass guitar speakers](#) include neodymium magnets. This gives performers a quicker and more dynamic response. The speakers (available in 10", 12" and 15" models) can handle higher power levels without saturation and offer a wider frequency response range. Bassists can get both a strong low-end punch and the higher harmonics that will round out their tones.

"ToneSpeak has already nailed down the guitar market, there's no doubt about it," says Phil. "Nobody can beat them in the guitar market. I'm now wanting to work with Anthony and the company to get the best bass speakers that money can buy."

"I put my life's work into these amplifiers," says Phil. "To have a speaker that gives me the same warm fuzzies that my amplifier does, that just takes away all the stress out of my life when it comes to the end product."



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