

Vic Stolpe

Vintage speaker Dos and Don'ts

SOOO...YOUSCOREAKILLER vintage amp, get it home, crank it to 11, and lay down your best "Sunshine of Your Love" riffage – but after one time through the lick, you toast a speaker. Now what?

Most players think that when a speaker goes bad, it's bound for the dumpster or will spend the rest of its days as a conversation piece sitting on a shelf. But Vic Stolpe thinks otherwise.

Stolpe, founder of the Los Angeles-based Heavy Sound Company, has been repairing speakers since 1993 for clients including Andy Summers, The Black Crowes, Billy Idol, John Fogerty, Robben Ford, and Rick Holmstrom. He is also known on the studio scene in Los Angeles, where many engineers trust his finely-tuned digits to fix speakers used in a variety of pro sound environments. And then there are the collectors – the guys with rare vintage speakers who flock to Vic for his magic touch...

So what's the big deal with vintage speakers?

A lot of guys love the way they sound. After years of being played and exposed to air, they soften up, sound warmer, and break up smoother. Of course, there's always the exception; some older speakers, if they haven't been kept in good humidity, temperature, air quality, are going to have dried up, and they may sound like garbage.

Is it possible to fix a speaker without re-coning it? In other words, if you've got a prized amp that you really want to keep 100 percent original?

It depends on the situation. I recently had an old Jensen in the shop with a voice coil that had come unglued from the spider; the cone was perfect and it was still a nice speaker. But in its guts, where everything comes together, the glue had essentially disintegrated.

Anyway, I've got some tools, like a microscopic oil can glue gun, and some dental tools. And sometimes I can put on my magnifying glasses and weasel up in there, shoot a bead of glue around it, and it might be good for another 40 years. If you're hell-bent on keeping the original cone and parts, or if the parts are just not available, I can try.

Are re-coned speakers as good as vintage?

I think so, as long as you pay attention to what you pull out of the speaker and make sure what you're putting back in is as close as possible to looking the same. The way things look is half the battle. If a speaker comes back, or you get a re-cone kit and the parts don't look similar to your old speaker, chances are it's not going to sound the same.

The reissue kit for the Jensen P10R is a good example, I don't think they're really reissue kits at all. I was surprised because they're really expensive, and you would think that cost is to ensure you're getting VOS parts, or exact reissues of the old stock stuff.

But the reissues don't look anything at all like old P10R cones. Sure, they have Nomex voice coils and tan gaskets like the old Jensens did, but the cones look more like an Eminence than a Jensen. And remember, the way the cone is shaped adds to the sound. But you can custom order P10R cones.

Are parts getting tough to find for certain speakers?

Well, the machining tools they use to punch the cones out are getting dull. And as they get dull, they start cutting roughly around the edges. These companies are finding it's not worth the thousands of dollars to fix the machines just to sell a couple dozen cones every month. The vintage speaker market is still a pretty small niche, so once these machines drop, they discontinue the cones.

So yes, it's getting harder to find specific stuff, and you end up stuck a lot of the time with whatever's available.

There are still a couple of internet dealers who claim to have original parts, but I'm wary because I know how hard it is to get parts. Sure, some guy might have an old kit lying around with parts in it that haven't turned to dust after 40 years, but those are rare.

Are there certain speakers that are tough to get, versus some that'll always be readily available?

Celestion speakers are pretty much cut and dried. You'll always be able to get some variation of those that will work in your frame. And I think of those, there are only four or five different cone types. The most common is the 1777, which comes in the Alnico Blue, greenbacks, and some Vintage



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30s – those are easy to find. But the greenbacks from the late '60s – the 25- and 30-watt ones that had "102" or "103" stamped on the back of the cones – those you just can't get anymore. If you've got an old greenback with a 102 or 103 stamped on the back, and it works, leave it alone! If you're really interested in the amp as a collector's item, take out the speaker, put it in a shoebox, and stick it in a closet.

I've learned how to retrofit the 102 and 103 speakers to 1777s and have done it on a couple of occasions. And my clients swear by them. I think part of the reason is that I can make them look accurate.

If one speaker in a cab or combo goes bad, is there a good chance the rest will follow?

Here's one of my golden rules: never, ever re-cone a vintage speaker for the sake of re-coning! If it ain't broke – don't fix it! You never know when a speaker is going to blow, and what may have affected one may not have gotten to the others. I can put a new speaker on a signal generator to break it in, but it may take another 40 years to make it sound like the vintage one.

I've had countless people come to me with one speaker that's gone and they want me to re-cone the whole bunch, and I always try to talk them out of it. Instead of re-coning, I suggest pulling the speaker, putting it in a safe place, and putting something else in that you like the sound of. A lot of times the original speakers in lower-level vintage amps weren't all

that great to begin with – they weren't using P10Rs or P12Rs, but maybe cheaper Jensens or Utahs, Calrads, or the made-in-Denmark W-12s... all kinds of stuff.

So, yank the original and stick a new Jensen in there, or whatever floats your boat. Often, you'll be surprised at how good some newer speakers can sound.

How different is the sound of a re-coned speaker?

A lot of people have a phobia about re-coned speakers. I had some 12" SRO Electro-Voice (EV) speakers for sale and I received a ton of calls about them, but everybody wanted to know if they were the original cones. Even after I told them they were re-coned, they still wondered! And I'm thinking, "What are they planning to do with the original cones when they're busted?" But some collectors want the whole thing to be original, even if it doesn't work. And you can't get EV cones anymore. Maybe somewhere down the road you might find some old codger who has a few lying around, but that's your only hope.

My re-cones of the 12" SROs are as close as you'll get to the real thing. They were a reproduction cone, with the original style and the paper edge all the way out. Some places just stick a similar cone in there and hope you won't know the difference.

But again, looks are very important.

Do you have any tips for the "care and feeding" of vintage speakers?

Well, something I see all the time is guys carrying equipment in the back of their amp's speaker cabinet – batteries, picks, cables, foot pedals... I've found all of these things inside speaker cones.

I know it's tempting, when you're packing up, to stick all that stuff in the back. But you throw it in your car, move it around, and the next thing you know there's a 9-volt battery popping through one of your speakers.

One guy brought in a Marshall 4x12" cabinet and told me the speaker was blown. But I took the thing apart and about a half dozen crayons and pieces of chalk fell out. Then I opened the speaker he had a problem with, and it had one of those toy army men inside it. Obviously, his kids were using the amp as a toybox!

Also, speakers are delicate. If you drop one, its magnet can shift, which pretty much kills a speaker unless you have a facility to demagnetize and reset the speaker, and remagnetize the frame. I've had some success repairing and resetting magnets, but in most cases, it's shot.

Another killer of speakers is dust, which gets into a speaker no matter what you do. There's a reason a lot of amplifiers come with covers – it's not because they make the amp look groovy. If you've got a cover – use it!

Another factor is temperature; nothing will kill a speaker quicker than extreme heat or cold. So keep your speakers and cabs where there's a consistent temperature between 65 and 75, which will keep the cone from drying out or becoming brittle. The glue will crack, and so on.

Otherwise, just enjoy your speakers, play your heart out, and don't be afraid to use them. If they blow, go with a re-cone. You'll be sounding almost as vintage in no time!

Next month, Vic will walk us through the process of re-coning a speaker.

For more on Vic Stolpe, visit heavysound.com.

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