



STUDIO SWEET

The Benson Model 200

BY DAVE HUNTER

Los Angeles session aces of the '50s and '60s informed several developments in guitar-related technology, from the influence of Freddie Tavares and Bill Carson on Leo Fender's guitar and amp designs to Del Casher's pioneering wah pedal, and beyond. Such was the confluence of artist and tech that birthed Benson amplifiers in 1967.

They may not be household names, but they represented a pioneering collaboration between a demanding jazz and studio artist and a maker eager to push the

envelope in the name of tone, versatility, and performance while establishing what was arguably the first boutique amp brand.

Like many notable jazz guitarists of the

1967 BENSON MODEL 200

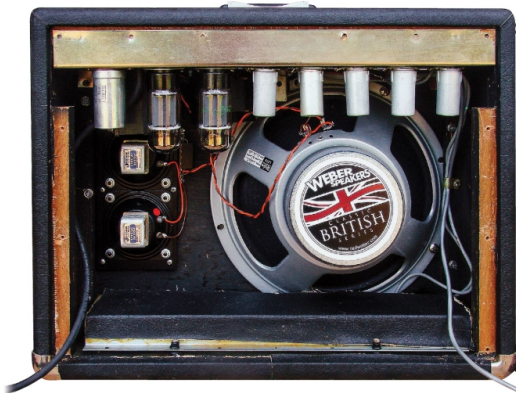
- Preamp tubes: four 12AX7, two 12AT7
- Output tubes: two 6L6GC
- Rectifier: solidstate
- Controls: Bass, Treble, Gain, High Frequency, Reverb, Tremolo Rate & Depth
- Speakers: Originally 12" Utah and two 4" Jensen tweeters
- Output: approximately 28 watts RMS

day, Howard Roberts' real bread-and-butter work was the stream of session dates the first-call studio ace performed on the busy L.A. scene. According to Jim Carlton's interview with Roberts in the September '11 issue of VG, this included more than 900 sessions per year at the peak of his workload, including playing on nearly 400 film scores in his career, and more than 2,000 albums from 1966 to '76. Given that level of prolificity, the playing clearly required a more diverse sonic arsenal than the jazz



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Note the lack of rear-panel features, replacement Weber speaker, and reissue Jensen tweeters.

riffs he'd burn on at clubs around town, often later the same night. Roberts played on albums by Elvis Presley, Peggy Lee, Ray Charles, Duane Eddy, The Monkees, Rick Nelson, The Beach Boys, and hundreds of other pop artists, and by the mid/late '60s, he needed an amplifier versatile enough to cover the entire range.

In the tradition of many such artists, Roberts also gave lessons, and one of his students, Ron Benson, shared the star's passion for cutting-edge gear. Roberts related to Benson his preference for the tone of early-/mid-'50s Gibson GA-50 amps, along with dismay over the amp's challenges in keeping up with louder combos and their "one trick pony" personalities in the studio.

But, Benson decided to do something about it. After concluding the only route was to build a suitable amp, he learned the necessary electronics skills and, in close consult with Roberts, set about creating his own amplifier. Roberts suggested he build two of the first design—one for each of them—and he put up the funds to purchase parts. The game was afoot.



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is owned by musician, collector, and VG contributor Tommie James, who acquired it 10 years ago from a seller in California, who'd found it in the closet of a house he purchased.

Later Benson amps like the Model 300 HR Series were even more complex, with built-in fuzz, a Stress Control to mimic small-amp-output-stage overdrive, and nine plug-in equalizer modules to alter the voice of its second input/channel to suit rock, jazz, country guitar, trumpet, electric piano, voice, and more. This Model 200, however, is closer to Roberts' preferred Gibson GA-50, albeit with the reverb and tremolo he required for studio dates. The Benson/Roberts sonic ethos appeared to encompass an effort to achieve good headroom while also tapping the rich, appealing tube distortion that even in small doses, enlivened clean tones in jazz and pop,

while enabling compelling rock-and-roll sounds, too. Much of the design chased these deals.

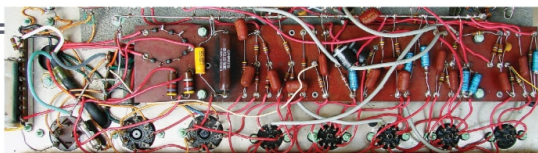
The Model 200 is about the size of a Fender Deluxe Reverb, and not dissimilar to the late-'60s silverface styling, right down to the "drip edge" metal trim around the speaker baffle. There are plenty of differences in the design, however, and aside from the similar inclusion of both reverb and tremolo, it's very much its own thing. For one, the Benson sports a pair of 6L6GC tubes in the output stage (some later Model 200s had EL34s), in cathode bias for about 28 to 30 watts (though likely not the 40 watts that Benson Electronics

All connections to the speaker, reverb pan, and reverb and tremolo footswitches are made via a terminal strip (middle left) on the underside of the chassis.

advertised for the model, which would be achievable from a fixed-bias output stage).

The amp originally had a 12" Utah speaker, and most were made to include two 4" Jensen Concert Series tweeters; this example has the cut-outs for them, but they're closed off in what appears to be a factory job, so it might have been custom ordered to exclude them. James replaced the blown Utah with a Weber speaker, and the electronics were restored by amp maker Mike Clark in 2014, with two reissue Jensen tweeters were added to bring it closer to stock. The unnamed knob at the center of the control panel was billed as a means of taking these tweeters in and out of the mix, but actually affects the high-frequency content within the circuit rather than the tweeters themselves.

Inside, the circuit board and layout are broadly Fender-like, and the board is filled with the brick-red (a.k.a. "chocolate drop") coupling capacitors found in



silverface Fenders of the late '60s and early '70s, but there are many differences in the circuit and construction, too.

This amp's early-production origins are also apparent in the utter lack of back-panel features – all speaker, reverb, AC-power, and footswitch connections are made from a terminal strip mounted to the underside of the chassis.

James' research indicates Benson and Roberts initially manufactured the amps in Benson's garage, but had to find other premises after complaints from neighbors revealed they were operating an un-zoned manufacturing facility.

"One night, Howard went outside and dropped all the beer bottles in a metal trash can and woke the neighbors," Benson told Jim Carlton for VG. "They figured out we

The layout and construction inside somewhat resembles Fender's silverface amps of the era, though there are several differences to both circuit and approach.

had a business going and the city made us move."

After that, Roberts sought investors and secured a manufacturing deal with the Dr. Henry Richter Corp. of Monrovia, California. After a few years, Richter's bankruptcy forced a move to L.D. Heater Music, Seattle, a company controlled by Norlin-era Gibson, which manufactured the amps until it, too, folded in '74, which marked the end of Benson. It's believed some 2,000 amps were manufactured, and the majority appear to have remained on the West Coast. **B**

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